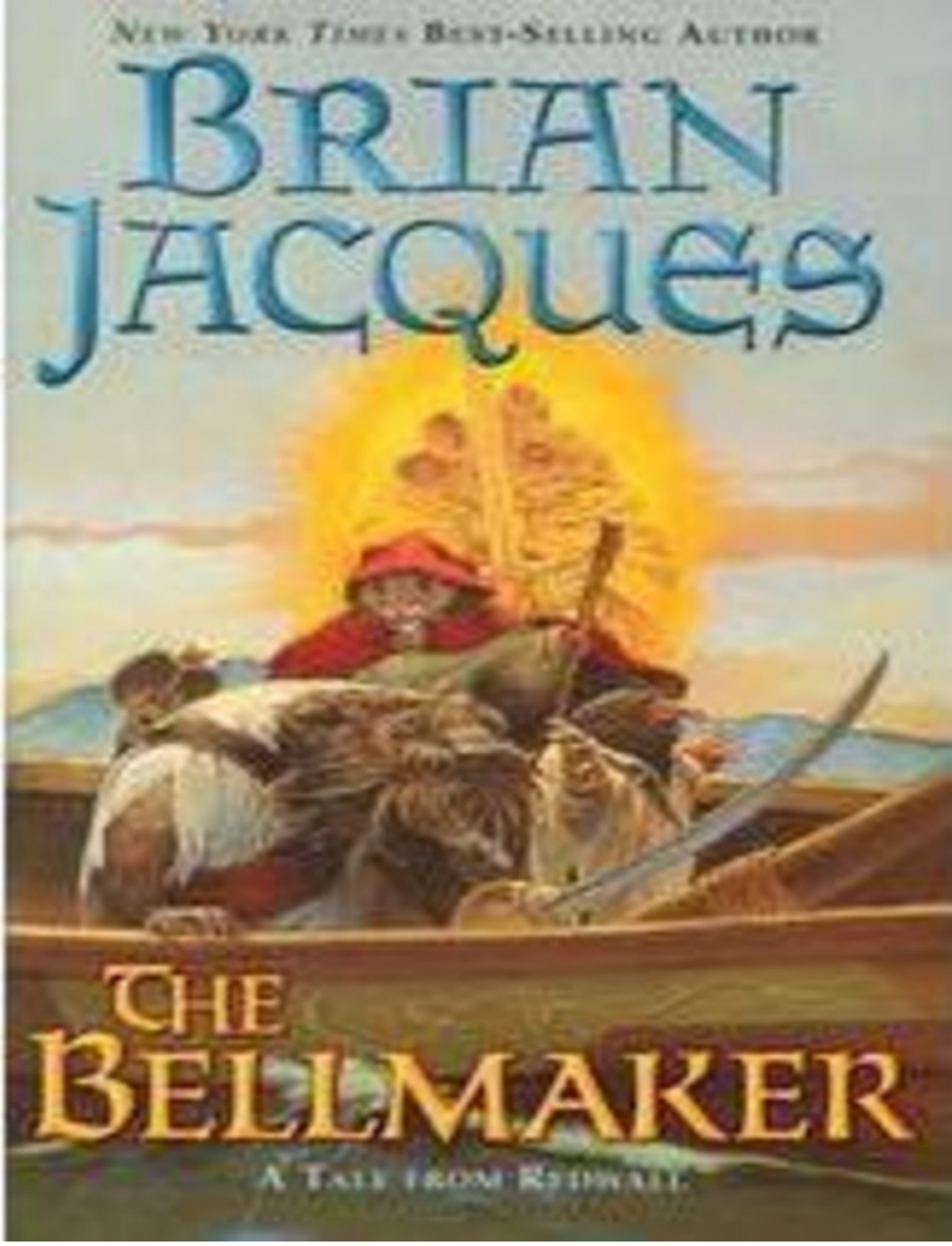
New York *Times* Best-Selling Author

# Brian Jacques



# The Bellmaker

A Tale from Redwall

# The Bellmaker

Redwall, Book 7

Brian Jacques

*V2.0 There were lots of scanning errors; doubtless many remain. Chapter headings before 10 missing.*

Storm-bruised clouds, heavy and lowering, dropped teeming rain into the howling March wind, slanting in from the northwest to batter the last of winters snow that clung to the stones of Redwall Abbey. Inside the gatehouse it was snug and warm, though there was not much room. All the available chairs and floor space had been taken up by little creaturesmoles, mice, squirrels, and hedgehogs. They watched in silence as an ancient squirrel, silver haired and bent with age from long seasons, banked up the fire with two beech logs. He turned slowly and, shooing two very young mice from his armchair, the aged squirrel sat, a twinkle in his eye as he watched his audience.

“Sit still, be good, my Dibbunsthe special breakfast will soon be here. Listen for the knock now; my ears dont work very well these days.

The little ones, who were collectively known as Dibbuns, cupped paws about their ears, listening intently. All that could be heard was the spattering rain on the windows and the wind mourning its dirge around the outside walls. The knock came upon the door like a spell being broken. A bass-voiced molebabe stood up shouting, “Hurr et be, brekkist!

Several of the young ones had to force the door open against the gale. A fat old hedgehog backed himself inside, pulling a trolley loaded with a cauldron, wooden bowls, and spoons. No sooner was he inside than the wind whipped the door shut with a loud slam. Shaking rainwater from his venerable gray spikes, the hedgehog lifted the cauldron lid. A delicious aroma from the steaming vessel caused cries of delight. He wiped the corners of his eyes on a spotted kerchief and winked at his companion in the armchair.

“Pearl Queen Pudden, messmatenothin like it on a cold wet day. Come on, me little mateys, pass these bowls n spoons around while its still

nice an hot.

All that could be heard was the scrape of spoon upon bowl as they sat eating breakfast. The ancient squirrel finished his portion and ruffled the ears of a mouse sitting on the chair arm. “You enjoying that, Jerril?

The little mouse licked his spoon. “Pearl Queen Pud-dens nice. Whats in it?

“Ask my mate. He made it.

The old hedgehog cleared the Dibbuns from his armchair on the other side of the hearth and sat down chuckling, his huge stomach shaking like a bowl of jelly. “Hohohoh! Ill tell ye whats in Pearl Queen Pudden, young Jerril. Anythin a beast can lay his paws on. Apples, nuts, berries, plums, an memories, lots o memories. Aint that right, messmate?

The squirrels eyes shone as he gazed into the fire.

“Aye, thats right. Memories. Long seasons gone an high old summers that never fade from our minds.

The bass-voiced molebabe looked up from his second helping. “Do that mean ee goin to tell usns a tale, zurr? he asked.

“Well, theres nothing else tdo in weather like this, said the ancient squirrel, as he put aside his bowl and spoon. “Aye, Ill tell you a story, but my mate will have to help me out in parts, because its a very long tale.

Jerril was licking his bowl, but he popped his head out to say, “Did yer make it up, sir?

The squirrel shook his grizzled head vigorously. “Make it up? Indeed not. No, young feller, this story is true. Tis not just my story; it belongs to many creatures. 1 gathered their own bits from each one of em.

The hedgehog in the armchair opposite nodded. “Aye, though it wouldve never happened but for one, a mouse called Joseph the Bellmaker, for the dream was his.

Outside, the rain flattened young grass and the wind rattled leafless branches that were trying hard to put out small buds. A delicately thin

icicle tinkled from the gatehouse roof, like the last tear of winter. Inside, the ruddy firelight gleamed on the young faces, each one watching the ancient squirrel as he leaned forward and began the story.

# Book One: The Dream

It is said that in the hungry land of ice and snow from whence he came the beast was known and feared by the names he had taken. Fox wolf! The Urgan Nagru!

He and his mate, Silvamord, commanded a vast horde of savage gray rats. They ravaged the northlands unopposedtundra, forest, and mountain lay under the claws of Nagru and his vixen. But the Foxwolf knew there was one enemy he could never defeat, one foe more ruthless than any living thing. Winter!

Snow, ice, howling blizzards, and famine were the real rulers of the country he had despoiled, a bone-chilling starkness that conquered all. Nagru and Silvamord were forced to yield, realizing that starvation and death stalked the country they had stripped bare. So it was that Nagru took Silvamord and all the horde in three great ships to search for the sun.

Those were the dangerous seasons. Battered across dark, roaring seas they went, narrowly dodging huge floating ice mountains, the ships sails and riggings frozen stiff with rimy spray. Sometimes they lay becalmed in ghostly latitudes, wreathed in spectral mists with the waters beneath them still and fathomless. Completely lost, the Foxwolf plowed onward, driven across trackless wastes where no vessels bow had ever cut spray, avoiding leviathans of the deep and shoals of unnamed sea-beasts. Strange, hostile waters closed over their wake as the weary convoy sailed deeper into the unknown.

Then one morning the lookouts saw that the seas were gentler. Small fish swam playfully alongside the wave-scoured hulls, and the weather turned fair. Gazing upward, the eyes of Foxwolf beheld fleecy white clouds with sun peeping between them. Looking out to the horizon, he saw the thin green-brown line of land. The Foxwolf threw back his head and howled triumphantly.

He had defeated the wide, wintry seas. Silvamord joined him on deck, and together they bayed their defiance at the blue spring sky. Roaring and screeching, the gray rat horde thronged decks and rigging to cheer their leaders. It was a curious sight: three big, battered ships, swarming with thin, wild-eyed creatures, tattered sails flapping above creaking decks as they rode the ingoing swell toward shore. And so it was that Urgan Nagru came to the far south!

The land lay like a dream out of time under the spell of early spring. Southsward! A soft, peaceful region of plenty that had never felt the cruel breath of war. Stowing the three ships up a heavily wooded creek, Nagru waded ashore with Silvamord and their ragged, murderous followers. Lean from hunger and privation, eager for loot and conquest, they pressed hurriedly inland. The time of the Foxwolf had come to Southsward!

From his vantage point on a wooded hilltop, Rab Stream-battle gazed across the valley to Castle Floret. The otter had watched and planned almost every day as spring passed into summer. Castle Floret stood atop a high flat plateau, its north side abutting the sheer cliff face. The castles other three sides were surrounded by a crescent-shaped moat. A mighty drawbridge commanded almost a third of the front south side, and at this edge the plateau had a long flight of broad steps carved into the living rock from top to valley floor.

Rab stared sadly at his old home. It resembled a beautiful forgotten cake left standing on the green-clothed tableland. Against a sky of dusty blue, cream-colored towers shimmered beneath quaint, circular red-tiled roof-caps. Dark green ivy and golden saxifrage flourished amid the crenellations. Campion and climbing roses burgeoned carelessly over windowsills and framed doors. The hot afternoon did not contribute the slightest breeze to ruffle the variegated pennants draped idly around tall flagpoles.

Rab dismissed the dreamlike qualities of his old home, riveting his worried brown eyes on the window alongside the drawbridge top. Had something gone wrong? Did Nagru know of the escape that had been planned? His friends, Gael Squirrelking, Queen Serena, and little Truffen, had they received the message from Relph the blackbird? The otter clutched his bow tightly, staring at the window, awaiting the signal as thoughts raced through his troubled mind.

Why, oh why, had Gael not listened to him? Rab recalled the day he had first argued with his friend. The quarrel had become furious and bitter and had ended with Gael ordering his old friend either to curb his tongue or leave the castle. Stone-faced, Rab stalked angrily out of Floret, taking the entire otter castle guard with himnot because he feared Nagru, but because he could see the evil that Gael was blind to.

Rab hated and loathed the cunning Foxwolf with an intensity that banished all fear. Now his friend the Squir-relking and his family were prisoners in their own home. The wickedness of Nagru was a specter that would soon blight the whole of Southsward. Gael should have

heeded the warnings Rab had issued, but instead he chose to play the king and offer the Foxwolf hospitality.

Suddenly, Rabs eye caught a flutter of iridescent blue-black wings carrying a scrap of red cloth to the window by the drawbridge.

Rab Streambattle notched an arrow to his bowstring.

The escape was on!

The sun hung like a hot merciless eye, watching two small creatures huddled in the shade of a shale outcrop on die wasteland floor. The mousemaid Mariel of Redwall shook an empty flask over the outstretched tongue of her friend Dandin. Two single drops fell slowly, then no more.

“Put your tongue away, she said, sadly. “The sun will think were mocking him.

The young mouse nodded skyward as he withdrew his parched tongue. “Huh, hes been mocking us for the last week.

They both sat staring at the empty flask. Mariel gently kicked her slack haversack. “Two stale oatcakes in there. Dyou fancy one?

Dandin smiled ruefully. “No thanks. Theyre the two you said youd keep as a memento of Redwall Abbey. Its four seasons since we left thereId break every tooth in my head trying to chomp on them. Besides, Im too dry to eat. Whew, its too hot even to talk!

Mariel closed her eyes, settling back into the shade. “Sleep then; well carry on tonight when it gets cooler.

Dandin lay down clasping his paws behind his head and called out to the sun, “Did you hear that? Were going to sleep, turn the heat down a bit, will you!

Mariel opened one eye. “Get to sleep, thirstygut, she said.

Dandin closed his eyes. There was a moments silence, then he began talking aloud to himself. “Itll be teatime back at the Abbey now. I bet I know what theyll be having, too. Cold strawberry cordial from deep in the cellars, October ale, dark and cool in foaming tankards. Probly mint tea as well, icy cold, brewed since dawn, clear and fragrant, just right for sipping on a hot day like ...Yowch!

Mariel brandished the haversack over her friend. “One more word and Ill let you have it again!

“Cant hear you, old mouseypaws, Dandin said as he flopped against her, rolling his eyes comically. “Youve knocked me senseless with those two oatcakes in there.

“Good. Perhaps youll be quiet now.

“Quiet? I havent said a single word!

“Right, then Ill say a single word. Goodnight!

“Dont you mean good afternoon?

“I mean goodnight, or Ill brain you with this haversack!

“Oh, righto. Goodnight!

Mariel woke in darkness. Warned by her warrior instinct, she lay motionless. Somebeast was trying gradually to sneak the haversack out from under her head. It was not Dandinshe could hear his snores drifting gently up to the canopy of the star-strewn night. As the final corner of their supply bag eased slowly away, she sprang into action. Slamming a footpaw hard on the haversack, she prevented the thief from making off with it. In the dim light, Mariel could make out a small, fat figure scurrying off into the wasteland. Snatching one of the two ancient oatcakes from the bag, the mousemaid hefted it like a discus, yelling as she flung it.

“Redwaaaaallll!

Thonk!

It struck edge on, right between the robbers ears. He dropped in a heap. Dandin leaped up, still half asleep, his paws waving.

“More October ale there! Wha ... Who ... Mariel!

As she ran toward the felon, the mousemaid was yelling, “I knew those oatcakesd come in usefulgot the blaggard!

Dandin followed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. When he arrived upon the scene, Mariel was kneeling crestfallen over her quarry. “Oh dear, whatve I done? she wailed. “Hes only a little un!

It was a small hedgehog. Dandin stooped to feel the big bump in the

center of its head.

“Middle of the night, running target, great shot Id say.

Mariel turned on him, her eyes brimming with tears. “Oh, Dandin, how could you say that. Id never have thrown at such a little feller intentionally. But it all happened so quickly, I couldnt see who it was.

Dandin picked up the oatcake and chuckled. “Not to worrylook, the little rogues coming around fine. Haha, this is a true Redwall missile. See, theres not even a mark on it!

The small hedgehog sat up slowly, gingerly pawing his head. He blinked at them and said, “Ooh! Where be I? Wot appened?

Before Mariel could answer, Dandin chipped in, “You tripped and bumped your head, old lad.

Glaring at Dandin, the little beast bristled. “Me name dont be oF lad. I be Bowly Pintips, an Ill thank ee to address I proper!

Dandin adopted a look of mock fear and bowed respectfully. “Accept my humble apologies, Your Royal Bowlyness!

Bowly snatched the oatcake and brandished it. “See this ere rock as I tripped over? Well, you make sport o me, an Ill biff ye with it! Wots yore names? Speak up now afore I loses me temper with ye both!

The hedgehogs impudence caused Mariels mood of pity to vanish instantly. She grabbed Bowly firmly by his nose, pulling him up on tippaw, and said, “Listen to me, you cheeky little robber. Im Mariel of Redwall and this is Dandin. Were both warriors. So keep a civil tongue in your head, or well give you two more lumps to go on top of the one youve already got!

Tears streamed from Bowlys eyes as his nose was squeezed. “Yowow! Leggo ob be doze, yore hurtig bee!

Mariel released him and he groveled in the sand, rubbing at both bump and snout. The mousemaid nodded as she sat by him.

“Thats better. Now, whats a little snippet like you doing out in the wastelands all alone? Wheres your mum n dad?

Bowly shrugged glumly. “Never ad none as I cd remember. Two weasels ad me catchered south of ere, made me slave for em, tied me

to a post at nights, but I scaped an mimed away.

Dandins friendly face grew grim. “How far south are these two weasels, Bowly? he asked.

“About arf a nights march from ere. I only scaped just afore dark, Mister Dandy.

“My names Dandin, not Mister Dandy, said Dandin, pawing the long dagger at his belt. “These two weasels, have they got food and drink?

“O aye, they got vittles aplenty. Robs travelers, they do.

Mariel had retrieved the haversack. She knotted the carrying ropes together, exchanging a slow smile with Dandin. “Lets go and pay these two weasels a visit, she said.

The sand and shale were still warm from the days heat, but the night air was cool as the three creatures strode south. Bowly Pintips giggled aloud when Dandin explained their plan to him.

Spurge and Agric the weasel slavers sat by their fire as dawns rosy paws probed the eastern horizon. They were trying to brew a pan of mint tea, and making a total mess of it. At the side of the fire lay a stack of raw apple pancakes. Spurge burned his paw on the pan handle and danced about waving it. “Rot me ears,ow does that Hddle spikedog brew this stuff?

Agric prodded the pancakes with a wicked-looking willow cane. “Search me, he said. “Huh! I aint sure ow tcook these pancakes the rascal made las night. Rotten liddle pincushion, well track im down; he cant go far without water in the wastelands. Waitll I lay claws on im. Ill make that runaway weep fer a season or more! He swished the cane through the air, grinning crookedly in anticipation of giving Bowly a severe whipping.

“Mornin, sirs. Sorry I runned off liken that las night!

Spurges jaw dropped. There was Bowly, ambling around the big shale rock that marked their camp. Quivering with rage, Agric pointed with the cane to a wooden post driven into the ground with a heavy shackling rope attached to it.

“Yew liddle scum, Im goin to bind you t that post an lash the prickles offa yore hide. Cummere!

Spurge knocked the cane aside. “After brekkfist, matey. We want im fit t cook our vittles first. Get to it, yew lazy lump!

Obediently, Bowly stirred crushed mint leaves into the bubbling water, setting the pancakes on a thin shale slab which he balanced over the fires edge. As he worked, Mariel strolled into the camp, smiling foolishly. She waved a paw at the two weasels.

“Morning! Lovely day, isnt it? Any breakfast going spare for a hungry traveler?

Spurge and Agric could not believe their luck. Not only had the runaway surrendered, but they had suddenly got themselves a simpleton mousemaid traveling alone. It surely was turning out to be a nice day.

“Wot ygot in there, mousey? said Spurge, eyeing the haversack their new arrival was carrying.

Mariel winked and wrinkled her nose. “Oh, a bit of this V that, yknow.

The weasels went into a huddle, sniggering and whispering. After a while Agric turned to Mariel saying, “If yew wants to eat you gotta elp, see. Theres fresh fruit an water in that holler under the rock. Yew elp that lazy edgepig to ready the vittles, then well see yew gets somethin nice, wont we, matey?

Spurge gave a malicious chuckle. “Ho yerss, itll be a real surprise!

The food stock was good. Mariel busied herself preparing a fruit salad of strawberries, apples, plums, and pears. Pouring honey and water into a gourd, she crushed damsons in it and began shaking up a cordial. The weasels sat in the shade of the rock as the morning sun got up. They nudged each other, sniggering with ill-concealed mirth. Mariel winked at Bowly as she called out,

“Mornings risen and breakfasts here, Eat, my friends, and be of good cheer!

Flipping his long dagger from paw to paw, Dandin strode boldly into the camp, kicking the weasels foot-paws out of his way, instead of stepping over them.

“Well, well, Mariel the Gullwhacker, am I invited to eat?

Mariel gave a roar of laughter quite inappropriate for a simple

traveling mousemaid. “Hoho! Dandin, you old warrior, welcome!

Mariel and Bowly laid the food down on the ground.

Dandin sat down between the two astonished weasels, calling out to Bowly, “Come on, little un, grab a plate and spoonjoin us.

Bowly obeyed with a will, helping himself to a hot apple pancake and a cooling beaker of damson cordial. As the weasels reached out for food, Dandin dealt them a couple of sharp slaps with the flat of his dagger blade and clucked disapprovingly at them. “Teh, tch! Wheres your manners? Guests and young uns first. Ill tell you when its your rum.

By this time, the two weasels were looking distinctly uneasy. A lone mousemaid was one thing, but this Dandin looked like a seasoned warrior.

Mariel, Dandin, and Bowly ate heartily, letting the mint tea cool as they sipped damson cordial and treated themselves to hot apple pancakes and fruit salad.

“Youd have to be a robber and travel wide to get stuff like this, eh, young un? Dandin said cheerfully to Bowly.

Bowly nodded sagely. “Aye, that ywould, Sir Dandy.

“Robbers must have to be good cooks. What dyou say, Bowly? said Mariel, sipping some mint tea appreciatively.

“No, marm, some robbers is slavers too. They catchers a liddle slave an makes im do all the work. Robbers is awful creaturesthey beats their slaves an ties em up nights to a post wi a big eavy rope, like thatn yonder.

The weasels were very nervous now. Dandin caught their attention as he slit a pancake neatly in half with the keen edge of his dagger. His voice was low and dangerous as he said, “I dont suppose honest creatures like you would know of two such slavers, would you?

Agric developed a sudden stammer. “N ... n ... no S ... sir! he squawked, his throat bobbing nervously.

Bowly gurgled, spraying mint tea as he tried to suppress an attack of the giggles. The weasels were robbers and bullies, but when faced with the two warriors they were cowards.

Dandin stared hard at the trembling slavers and, picking up the willow cane, he swished it under their noses. “Mariel, what dyou think, are these two telling the truth?

The mousemaid strode across to the wooden post the weasels had driven into the ground to tether Bowly. She unfastened the short, heavy rope from it. Winking at Bowly and Dandin, she began tying a solid, complicated 4 knot in the ropes end. “Oh I dont know, she said. “They look like fairly respectable beasts to me.

From the weasels food cache she produced half a dozen mixed beech and hazelnuts, still in their shells. Placing them in a line on a flat rock, she turned to Spurge and Agric.

“See this knotted rope? I used to own one like itcalled it my Gullwhacker. I could lay a big seabird flat with one blow. Now I cant see any gulls hereabouts, but there1 d be other things to whack if I thought certain creatures were lying to us.

Spinning the knotted rope in a skillful blur, Mariel dealt six lightning blows to the nuts on the rock.

Whack! Smack! Crack! Thud! Bang! Splat!

The weasels squeaked with fright. Trembling, they stared wide-eyed at the line of kernel and shell fragments, which was all that remained of the six nuts. Mariel dangled the Gullwhacker a fraction from their noses. “See what I mean?

Bowly grinned from ear to ear as he patted the weasels none too gently on their heads. “Nay, nay, youve made a mistake. I cn see these are two good vermints. Why, I wager given arf a chance theyd thank us for callin in to brekkist an give us water n vittles to elp us pore travelers on our way, wouldnt you?

Spurge and Agric took the hint swiftly. Leaping up, they loaded their food and drink store into the haversack. Bowly stood by, tossing the two hard oatcakes up and down.

“These be my throwin rocks. I been knowed to fetch foebeasts down at fair distances with em, cos I be a warrior too, see.

Dandin removed sufficient supplies for a day from the pack and laid them in front of the weasels. “You havent had breakfast yethere, take this with our compliments. Were traveling south. Which way are you bound? Spurge shrugged unhappily. “North, I think, sir. Mariel swung

the Gull whacker expertly across her shoulders. “Well, keep an eye out for those two thieving robbers we mentioned, and be carefulits dangerous country out here.

Dandin spun his dagger in the air. Catching it by the hilt, he thrust it into his belt. “Aye, take care; never know who you might bump into.

And the three friends strode off calling cheerful goodbyes to the crestfallen weasels.

Thoroughly refreshed, they stepped out with a will. A mere half mornings walk brought them in sight of green, hilly scrubland and the promise of gentle, fertile countryside. Bowly trudged alongside Mariel, tossing his two oatcakes in the air.

The mousemaid caught one and said, “Now then, you young rip, what are we going to do about you?

The small hedgehog snatched the oatcake back indignantly. “Ive told ye my name be Bowly Pin tips; I aint no young rip. I be goin wi you an Dandy; I be a warrior from now on!

Dandin sliced an apple into three with his dagger and gave them each a piece, winking at Mariel over the small hedgehogs head. “What dyou thinkhas he got the makings of a warrior?

Bowly scrunched his face into a ferocious scowl to show that he had. Mariel returned Dandins wink. “Being a warrior doesnt always mean a fierce face; warriors are also renowned for their gentleness.

Bowly immediately changed his expression until he thought he looked gentle enough to charm baby birds from their nests. Stifling their smiles, Mariel and Dandin carried on extolling warrior virtues, while Bowly took note of all they said.

“Oh yes, warriors are handsome beasts. Bowly wobbled his head, fluttered his eyes, and tried hard to look handsome.

“Youre right, Dandin, but Ive known warriors who can look very stern too. The handsome Bowly suddenly transformed into one with a grim jaw jutting and what he imagined were cold, gimlet eyes. Mariel spluttered and coughed on a bite of apple, while Dandin held his ribs tight to stop the laughter bubbling out.

“Aye, but give me the warrior with that devil-may-care look, one who can slay ruthlessly but still manage to laugh merrilynow thats the

fellow for me! Bowlys small face contorted as he tried to glare out of one eye while twinkling merrily with the other, and he brandished his two oatcakes as if ready to slay with them at a moments notice, at the same time emitting a savage growl which he tried to couple with a merry laugh. Turning to his two companions, who were shaking with unexploded laugher, he sighed wearily.

“Phwaaw! It do take much ard work to look like a warrior!

The two teasers laughed heartily, patting Bowlys tender young prickled head. “We think youll make a splendid warrior, dont we, Dandin?

“Right! Well be three warbeasts traveling south through thick and thin to wherever our adventures take us!

Bowlys face lit up in a happy grin, and he clasped the paws of his two comrades firmly. “Aye, an never fear. Til take care of ee both!

Queen Serena watched her little son, Truffen, sadly as he sat alone in the center of Castle Florets banqueting chamber. Poor squirrelmite, forced to spend his days and nights in captivity, often separated from both parents, with only his old badger nurse, Muta, to protect him. Serena and her husband, Gael Squirrelking, sat together at one side of the chamber, with Truffen at his bench in the center, while on the opposite side Nagru and Silvamord occupied the positions of honor at high table, surrounded by rodent Captains. Serena clutched Gaels paw tightly, and they fixed their eyes on the tiny hostage.

Serena let her mind wander over past events. Was it only a season ago that Nagru and Silvamord had arrived at their gates? It seemed as though they had been in Castle Floret for an eternity. She recalled the night they had allowed Nagru and his mate into their home. It was a windy, drizzling evening in early spring, and the two foxes had looked half dead, starved, and bedraggled. Her husband, Gael, ordered that they be admitted, fed, and clothed warmly. Serena regretted that Gael had not heeded the urgent warnings of their friend Rab Stream-battle. But the Squirrelking could be stubborn, and he would not hear of Castle Florets hospitality being denied to any needy creature. Rab continued to oppose him, and the argument escalated until the angry otter stormed out of the castle, taking his otter guard with him.

Within the space of two sunsets the foxes had taken over everything. It was done with fiendish simplicity. Silver-tongued Silvamord had lured Muta to a side chamber and locked her in. Nagru snatched little

Truffen and held him breathless with fright, the fearsome hooked wolf-claws a hairbreadth from the babes throat. Gael was forced to lower the drawbridge, and in a trice the castle was teeming with rats, savage, dirty gray rodents, eager to maim, destroy, or kill at a nod from their leaders, Nagru and Silvamord.

From that moment their lives had hung by a thread. All loyal friends and courtiers who resisted were slain or imprisoned in Florets dungeons, while those who were not considered dangerous were forced to wait on the foxes and their officers. The far southern sun no longer shone over a peaceful and happy land. A new king and queen held sway, backed by a horde of murderers.

Nagru was big for a fox. Lean and powerful, he was mottled bluish gray from tip to tail, and his cruel eyes resembled chips of granite flake floating in a sea of carmine blood flecks. His only clothing was the full pelt of a wolf, its head resting on top of his own like a cowl with eyeless sockets. The hide trailed down over his back with the front limbs covering his own. The wolfclaws had been replaced with sharp iron hooks, and when Nagru slid his own paws inside them they became awesome weapons.

His mate, Silvamord, was smaller in stature, but no less savage. Her fur was whitish gray with a silver-striped muzzle and back markings, and her eyes were dark obsidian green. Her regalia was a thick skirt of animal tails with glittering chips of crystal cunningly sewn into them. She moved sinuously to its strange tinkle, the equal of her mate in cunning and evil.

Now the barbaric pair sat side by side, sipping elderberry wine from Florets cellars and sharing the gamey meat of a long-dead plover. Nagru spiked a damson with his claw and shot it viciously at a fat old rat who stood nearby holding a stringed lutelike instrument.

“Yoghul, play my song!

The rat began playing, singing the dirge in an eerie, high-pitched voice.

“Where do you come from, where do you go to, From tundras of white and bright sunrises few, Cross mountains and forests, oer seas wide and blue, The one they call Foxwolf, the Urgan Nagru.

Yoghul was playing the verse over again when Nagru called across to Gael, “Hey, Squirrelking, dyou know why they call me Foxwolf?

Gael sat silent, and Nagru answered his own question. “Because I am the only fox that ever slew a wolf. This is his hide I am wearing. Ill wager youve never even seen a wolf, much less had to fight one. Well I did, and I won. Nobeast alive can stand against me!

The Squirrelking ignored his captor, who continued boasting. “Ill tell you something else. That wolfs name was Urgan. So I took it and turned it backward and made a name for myself, Urgan Nagru! Try saying it both ways, it comes out the same. Thats to let my enemies know that I can come at them backward or forward, both ways. But I have no enemies, theyre all dead. Only fools and dreamers are left, like you and your Queen. Its your own fault, squirrel. You let me in here. Aha! I see you are glaring at me. Good! You are wishing that the Fox wolf were dead, eh? The wishes of the weak are like raindrops on the face of the sea; they count for nothing. Play on, Yoghul!

While Nagru drank wine and tore at his meat, Silva-rnord had been staring fixedly at Muta, the old badger nurse. Muta could not speak. Sometimes in peaks of joy or distress she would make hoarse barking noises, but it was unusual for her to make any sound at all. She crouched at little Truffens side, always faithful to him. It irritated Silvamord to see the dumb badgers devotion to her small charge, and the vixen never missed an opportunity to humiliate or torment Muta. Calling Yoghul across to her, Silvamord divested him of his cloak, a small red thing trimmed with yellow. Then she snatched the cap from his head. It was floppy and conical with two tiny bells hanging from it. Flinging both hat and cloak at Muta, Silvamord called out derisively, “Come on, up on your paws, stripedog. Put those on and do a dance for me. I command it, dance!

The big badger did not move. She stood glaring at the vixen. Silvamord beckoned Riveneye, one of the Captains seated nearby. “If that stupid beast doesnt start dancing right now, she barked, “I want you to take your sword to the squirrel brat and tickle a dance out of him!

Riveneye stood and drew his sword.

Muta had no choice. Rather than see Truffen hurt, she donned the small cloak and tied the ribbons of the ridiculous little hat beneath her chin. Slowly she commenced a shuffling dance.

Silvamord aimed a kick at the minstrel rat. “Play, Yoghulplay faster. I want to see the big fool dance!

Around and around Muta shambled, trying to keep up with the speed of the music, the bells tinkling wildly on her silly hat. Silvamord and the rats jeered cruelly at the badgers stumbling efforts. A single teardrop spilled down Mutas face.

Queen Serena turned away, unable to watch the cruel exhibition. Gael leaned in close as if sharing her sympathy and began whispering so only she could hear. “Its all right, Serena. Dont worry. Listen to me and try not to show any surprise. Remember our singing blackbird, Relph? Rab has sent me a message through him. There will be otters waiting in the castle moat today. We will accompany Muta when she takes Truffen for his afternoon nap. Relph will hang a red cloth on the window nearest the drawbridge to tell Rab we are coming. When we leave here, watch for the window with the red cloth on the sillthats the one we jump from. When we land in the moat, the otters will take us to safety. Dont look around; just nod if you understand ... Mutas hoarse bark caused the Queen to turn.

Truffen could not understand that Muta was being made fun ofthey had often played at dancing together. Seeing her dance now made the little fellow chuckle happily. It was a game! He began hop-skipping alongside her, giggling as he clapped his paws together in time to the music.

Muta threw back her head and made happy barking sounds, and the two danced wildly, leaping and jigging back and forth. Truffen pulled the cap from Mutas head as she bowed to him and waved it about, jingling the bells and shouting uproariously, “Fasta! Fasta! More!

Nagru flicked a damson contemptuously at Silvamord. “Well, I see youve managed to make them both happy, a prancing whelp and a jigging badger. Good work! Tell me, who looks die bigger fool now, you or the badger?

Silvamord flung a wooden bowl at Yoghul. “Stop playing, you oaf! she shrieked.

The music ground to a halt. Truffen jangled the cap bells. “More dances, Uta. Want more dances!

Taking advantage of the moment, Serena hurried over. Sweeping her little son up, she took Muta by the paw and began leaving the room. Gael joined them. “Time for Muta to take you for your nap, Truffen. Come on, Mummy and Daddy will go with you.

They were almost at the door when Silvamord called out, “Halt! Who

said you could leave without our permission?

Nagru idly flicked another damson at his mate. “Let them go, huh. Theyre not going anywhere.

Silvamord leaped up, eyes blazing. “Stop flicking damsons at me, spotblotch. Ill say when they can go! You just carry on slopping wine!

Nagru was not one to be insulted. He rose in a hot temper, sending dishes spilling and clattering. “Youll feel these claws if you talk to me like that, vixen! If I say they can go, my word is final! Dont try taking your sour mood out on me because your joke went wrong!

All the time the little party was edging farther out of the banqueting chamber. Silvamord grabbed a spear from a Captain named Hooktail and pointed it at the Foxwolf screaming, “Put those claws near me and Ill gut you! c Stop those creatures from leaving, now!

Two more rats, Sourgall and Ragfen, drew swords and leaped up. As Gael pushed the others ahead of him into the hall outside, Serena forgot herself and cried out, “Look on the windowsillthe red cloth!

Gael felt Sourgalls claws clamp on his shoulder. He jumped backward, cannoning Sourgall into Ragfen as he called out to the badger, “Muta, out of the windowjump for the moat! Help is waiting there. Save my family!

Then Gael went down. He was trampled and knocked aside as other rats, led by Silvamord, came charging into die passage. Muta dashed to the window where the red cloth fluttered, sweeping Serena and Truffen with her. Thrusting the little squirrel into his mothers outstretched paws, the big badger lifted them both bodily over the sill. A spearshaft broke across Mutas back. She grunted and flinched, then, gathering her mighty strength, she hurled mother and babe outward, so that they would not strike the castle walls in their descent to the moat. Turning, she ripped the dancing cloak from her shoulders. Muta smashed two rats flat with a single blow and smothered another two with the cloak, shoving them roughly into those behind and causing a melee of confusion in the enclosed space.

Now the corridor was packed with rats. Muta could not reach Gaelit was death to try. There was only one way left open to her. Lifting her bulk onto the windowsill, the badger glanced down at the long drop to the moat. Suddenly, claws sank into her lower back. Silvamord had climbed over the milling rats and seized her tight.

“Got you, stripehead! Now you 11 die long and slooooooo ... ! Without a second thought Muta had clamped her footpaws around the vixen and rolled off the windowsill, carrying her enemy through with her.

Rabs otters already had Serena and Truffen out on the bank as Muta and Silvamord came plummeting down and hit the water with a resounding boom. Locked together, they plunged beneath the surface. Muta rolled over, thrusting the vixen beneath her, then, stepping on Silvamords head, she pushed up toward the surface. Seconds later Muta was hauling herself up onto the bank and scrambling off in pursuit of her friends and their rescuers.

Terror and panic gripped Silvamordthe badgers footpaws had pressed her down into the muddy moat bottom. The vixens ears, nose, and mouth filled with water as she kicked and scrabbled furiously, then, coming free with a dull sucking noise, she drifted upward.

Whump!

The drawbridge thudded down onto the moatbank, and the rat horde came pouring out intent on catching the escaped prisoners. Spitting water and mud, Silvamord splashed up and down screeching, “Help! Save me, you fools ... Glubble ... I cant swim!

Trie rats halted, fearful of ignoring the Foxwolfs mate. Several long pikes and spears were stretched out quickly into the water, one so hastily that it clouted the drowning fox, half stunning her.

Nagru came bounding out over the drawbridge in time to see Silvamord hauled dripping from the moat. Her bedraggled skirt of tails clung wetly as she buffeted the head .of a rat called Crookneck, shouting, “I said save me, you addle-brained toad, not brain me!

As she sank exhausted to the grassy bank, Nagru berated her. “Idiot, why did you let them escape?

“Why did I let them escape? she shrieked, spitting moat water and mud at him venomously. “Where were you, bogbrains? Still swilling wine and feeding your face?

Nagru sighted the receding figures vanishing into the trees on the wooded hillside. He pointed to a group of twoscore or more rats standing on the bank. “You lot, follow me. Ill catch them!

Silvamord tottered upright at the waters edge, foot-paws seeking purchase in the wet grass. The Foxwolf could not resist giving her a

hefty slap on the back. “You stay here and dry off, vixen!

She overbalanced and toppled back, screeching, into the moat.

The four otters rushed Serena along at a cracking pace. Truffen was seated on the sturdy shoulders of a young male called Trout lad. Muta brought up the rear; for all her seasons and girth, she was still nimble and swift. Tree shadows threw alternating patterns of sun and shade over the Southswarders as they fled up the thick-timbered hillside.

Nagru halted at the bottom of the causeway steps leading down from the castle plateau. His keen eyes picked up the movements of the small group racing up the wooded tor across the valley. A rat Captain named Gatchag stuck his sword into the ground and sank down on his haunches beside the quivering weapon, shaking his head knowingly. “Huh, theyre away like two brace o woodpigeons. Nah! You wont catch em now. Take my word fer it!

Swift as a flash, the Urgan Nagru grabbed Gatchags sword and slew him with a single, powerful slash. The shock that ran through the rats was registered in a single moan, like a sudden gale running through long wheat. Nagru threw the blade down on the lifeless body.

“Anybeast got more strong opinions to voice can join him! Up on your paws, slopmouths, before I let daylight into some of your skulls! Mingol, take twelve and circle right. Riveneye, take another twelve and circle in from the left. The rest of you follow me. Well go straight up after them. If we shift fast enough, theyll be cut off from three ways. In my horde, a slow rat is a dead one. Now move!

Rab Streambattle and six of his otters watched anxiously as the fugitives toiled uphill. Rabs mate, Iris, fitted a stone to her sling. “Those rats are coming on fast, Rab. Theyre going to pincer in front of our lot before they get herewhatll we do?

The otter leader loosed an arrow, picking off one of Mingols front-runners. Laying another shaft on his bowstring he took aim and said, “Well have to buy them some time by holding off the rats. Lay on and make every shot count!

The otters attacked with a will. Arrows, slingstones, and short javelins whipped skillfully down the wooded slope to left and right, peppering the horderats and harrying their pincer movement. Rab hurtled forward and reached the fugitives. He ran past them, calling out, “Keep goingtheres help ahead, mates. Hurry! Nagrus right behind you. Ill keep him busy!

Rab Streambattle was a warrior who did not know the meaning of fear. The most skilled weaponbeast among otters, now he showed his mettle. Planting both footpaws firmly, he threw off his quiver and with a speed born of desperation began zipping arrows into the ranks of Nagrus rats.

The Foxwolf was sorry he had not slain the fierce otter on first sight. Leaping to one side he dodged behind a scrub oak, leaving the rat immediately behind to die by the arrow that was meant for him. Another rat screamed and leaped high, transfixed by Rabs next shaft. Nagru cursed silently, wishing he had brought a bow and arrows along. Hailing his claws wildly, he shouted, “Idiots! Move about, duck and dodge, use your arrows and spearshes only one otter!

A deadly shot from Rab pinned a rat to a rowan tree. Grim faced, he called out as he strung another arrow, “Aye, Im only one otter, but here I stand. Try an pass, scum!

Serena came gasping and stumbling into the outstretched paws of Iris. The otter embraced her briefly before going back to slinging rocks. “Serena, no time to chatter now. We must get you an the liddle un to safety! “But Gael ... and Rab, what about them? Keeping her eyes on the target, Iris bowled a rat over as her stone cracked his skull. “If your Squirrelking doesnt escape, theres nothin we can do at the moment, maim. As for my Rab, you know hed swap his life for friendsthats what hes doin now. Ive got to get you away, thats my job!

A spear had furrowed Rabs side. He ignored the searing pain and dropped a rat with an accurate snap shot. Then he counted his remaining arrows. Three.

Using bush and tree cover, Nagrus rats were surrounding Rab. Without turning his head, the brave otter roared, “Get them out o here, Iris. Go!

Snuffling a tear aside, his courageous mate hustled Se-rena and her babe along with the otters. “You heard my Rab. Come on, move yourselves!

They fled over the hilltop, zigzagging north through the trees. All but one.

A deep rumble shook Mutas huge frame; anger and hatred shone in the badgers dark eyes. With unbounded strength she seized the thick, overhanging limb of a dead whitebeam. Her sinews stood out like ropes as she tore it from the trunk with a resounding crack. Regardless

of twigs and splinters, Muta swung the large limb above her head, and like a whirlwind she thundered forward, launching herself upon Nagru and his vermin. Keen as March wind through a stormlashed forest, a high-pitched whine tore from her throat. The wide, twigged end of the bough caught Nagru, sending him muzzle over tail, soaring high into the air like a dead leaf. The Foxwolf thudded painfully against a hornbeam, his shocked eyes taking in the destruction Muta was wreaking on his hordebeasts as he fought to regain his breath. Finally he managed to shout: “Kill them both! Mingol, Riveneyesurround them! Use arrows; cut them down with spears ... Anything!

Back to back, the otter and the badger stood, battering away madly, one with a broken bow, the other with a tree limb. Wounded in a dozen places, they fought like mad-beasts as the gray vermin closed in on them.

Extract from the writings ofSaxtus, Father Abbot of Red-wail Abbey in Mossflower Country.

It occurs to me that small bees are as foolish as they are fat and fuzzy. Take for example, this fellow. Humming and bumbling around me as if I were a flower. Very disturbing when one is penning a chronicle. I think he wants this crumb of honey pudding, stuck to my whiskers. Here, take it, you rogue. No, the crumb, not my paw! Dearie me, are all bees as shortsighted as this one?

What a Recorder I am, playing with bees when I should be writing. Alas, the summer is to blame. It makes me want to dash outside and play with the Dib-buns (our Abbey young ones). It is they who hold the hope of Redwalls future; our Abbey would not flourish without the young. Many old friends have passed on to quiet pastures: Abbot Bernard, Friar Cockleburr, Old Gabriel Quill, and a few other dear companions have run their seasons peacefully to a close. But the earth and its creatures continue lo be renewed. Please forgive my ramblings and reminiscences under the spell of a warm summer. Let me tell you what has taken place of late at Redwall Abbey.

It all started as I was strolling in the orchard with Mariels father, Joseph the Bellmaker. We were enjoying the early morning peace together. Joseph told me that he had been thinking about Mariel a lot and worrying about her. More than four seasons have passed since she went off adventuring with that rogue Dan din, a friend of my young days. He is a wild mouse, but with a good heart. Mariel and Dandin are kindred spirits, both with a yearning to wander.

Josephs main worry was the lack of information about his daughter. He had received no news of Mariel from anywhere. Travelers, visitors to Redwall, passing birdsno creature knew their whereabouts, or had heard anything at all concerning Mariel or Dandin.

However, honest ones with troubled minds are often reassured by the appearance of Martin the Warrior in their dreams. Martin is the champion and founder of Redwall Abbey, a great warrior mouse who lived countless seasons ago. His guidance is peerless, and his words, though often shrouded in mystery, always carry a message of hope and truth. Little wonder then that a stout-hearted beast like Joseph the Bellmaker should find Martin, the spirit of Redwall, appearing in his dreams. I must confess that I was full of curiosity to learn of the message Martin had imparted to Joseph as his mind wandered the realms of slumber. But my good friend the Bellmaker was not ready to speak. He had not yet understood the meaning of Martins words.

A single loud knock on the gatehouse door disturbed Sax-tus from his writing. Without looking up, he called out, “I recognize that sound; only Joseph the Bellmaker has a paw like an oak club!

There followed a deep chuckle from outside as Joseph replied, “Saxtus, have you dozed off in there? Come on, dinnertime!

Hitching up his robe, the Abbot hastened to open the door. “Good afternoon, Bellmaker, or is it early evening? No matter. I cast aside the pen in favor of the spoon.

Joseph was a strongly built mouse, with a neat gray beard and a cheerful manner. He patted the Abbots stomach playfully. “Aye, I think the spoon is your favorite weapon these days, great Father Abbot.

Saxtus strode out ahead of the Bellmaker, to show him that a bit of extra weight had not slowed him down. “Hah! Great Father Abbot, indeed! Im only slightly older than your daughter. As for you, graybeard, youre old enough to be my father!

Joseph matched his stride, eyes twinkling mischievously. Walking across flower-bordered lawns, they headed toward the main Abbey building. It loomed massive against an early-evening sky, ancient red sandstone tinged dusky rose, framing a harlequinade of stained-glass windows by the glow of a lowering sun. The Bellmaker stepped up his pace, leaving Saxtus panting in his wake.

“I may be old enough to be your daddy, but Im still spry enough to be

your son. Come on, Father, keep up!

“Enough, enough. Slow down, ageless one! said Saxtus, catching hold of his friends sleeve. “Why is it that everybeast seems to be in a hurry today? Look, theres Foremole, going as if his tail were afire. Hallo, sir!

The Redwall mole leader halted and, tugging his snout respectfully, he addressed them both in quaint mole dialect: “Gudd eve to ee, zurrs. Whurr be you uns a-rushen to?

He fell in step with them as Joseph replied, “We werent really rushing, just stepping out a bit on our way across to dinner.

“Wem gotten guestbeasts furr dinner, said Foremole, wrinkling his button nose sagely. “Oak Tom an Treerose cummed in from ee woodlands.

Saxtus raised his eyebrows. “Well, that is a pleasant surprise. We dont see enough of Tom and his wife at Redwall. Those squirrels spend most of their time in Mossflower Wood together. Never know where they are from one season to the next. Any other guests?

“Hurrhurrurr! Foremoles dumpy frame shook with a deep chuckle. “Oid say ee best step out fast agin, zurrs. Missus Rosie an Tarquin, theym bringed all thurr hinfants to ee Abbey furr to stay awhoil.

Saxtus threw up his paws in mock despair. “Great seasons of famine! Tarquin and Rosie Woodsorrel with their twelve young hares, thats fourteen walking stomachs altogether. Theyll eat us out of house and home, then pick their teeth with the doornails!

“I dont mind not eating, said Joseph, clapping the Abbot on his back happily. “My dream is beginning to work out.

Saxtus halted beneath a drooping lilac. “What do you mean by that, friend?

“I can tell you this much, the Bellmaker said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Martin said some things to me in my dream last night of which I can only speak later on. But the first words he spoke I will repeat now. They went like this:

With sixteen more faces at table, Bellmaker recalls his quest. At daylights last gleam youll remember My words whilst you were at rest.

Foremole scratched his velvety head saying, “Wot do et all mean, zurr?

Joseph shrugged, but Saxtus nodded wisely. “It means that Martin will reveal all when the time is right.

Joseph continued walking to the Abbey. “Im glad you said that, Saxtus, he said, “because beyond those few words the whole thing is very hazy. I cant remember anything else Martin said.

The Father Abbot deliberately steered the conversation away from his friends dream, knowing that, if Martin had spoken, all would be revealed in good time. He held up a paw. “Listen, Joseph. I love to hear the sound of your bell!

Scented orchard blossom fragrance lay heavy on the summer evening air as the great Joseph Bell boomed out its warm, brazen message. Calling all Redwallers to cease their chores and come to Great Hall, for the days main meal.

A group of Dibbunssmall mice, moles, squirrels, and hedgehogstrooped round the south gable from the orchard. Singing lustily, they marched paw in paw.

“Give us dinner every eve, Or well pack our bags and leave. Where well go to we dont know, Up the path a league or so. If we dont find comfort there, Back to Redwall well repair. Well eat pudden, pie, and cake, All the Abbey cooks can make!

They stopped to let their elders pass indoors first. Bowing politely and scrubbing paws across strawberry-stained faces, they chanted dutifully: “Good evenin, Father Abbot. Evenin, Joseph, sir, evenin to you, Foremole, sir!

Saxtus raised his eyebrows. Peering at them over the spectacles balanced on his nose, he said, “Well, good evening to you, young sirs and ladies. Pray tell me, where are you all off to?

Scrubbing furiously at her face, a little molemaid replied, “Whoi, furr ee dinner, zurr. Usns worked ard all day.

Joseph surveyed the guilty-looking band. Pursing his lips in mock severity, he said, “Hmm, guarding the strawberry patch against robbers, no doubt. A very difficult job, Id say, eh?

A tiny mousebabe, covered from ear to tail with strawberry pulp and

seeds, puffed out his chest and squeaked, “Most ardest job I dood in all me life, sir!

Foremole prodded the babes swollen stomach gently. “Burr, youm sure ee can manage dinner arter all yon ard wurk ee dunn?

An equally small mole patted the mousebabe heartily. “Ho aye, ee surpintly can, zurr. Ee be a growen choild an needen lots o dinner, doant ee, matey?

The mousebabe nodded vigorous agreement. Saxtus looked to Foremole and Joseph, giving them a quick wink. “What do you think, sirs? Do these warriors deserve dinner as a reward for guarding our strawberries?

Foremole scratched his chin with a hefty digging claw. “Aye, oi do berleev theym do, zurr, tho theym lukk in need o a good scrubben furrst, hurr hurr!

“Oh yes, we cant have em sitting at table like that, the Bellmaker agreed judiciously. “All stained and scarred from their long, hard duties. Right, line up here, all down to the shallow edge of the Abbey pond. First one back and cleanest washed gets the biggest dinner. Ready, get set ... Go!

“Redwaaaaall! Chaaaaaarge! The Dibbuns sped off helter-skelter. Shaking with laughter, the three friends strode in to dinner.

From time out of mind Redwall Abbey had been renowned as a haven of comradeship, good manners, and legendary food. All Redwallers met each evening to share the fruits of their toil. Saxtus entered the Great Hall, warm in the feeling of being Father Abbot to the creatures of his beloved Abbey. Early-evening sunlight slanted down through the stained-glass windows, casting rainbow hues over the laden tables. Young and old alike sat together, the hum of their chatter rising to hallowed timber roof-beams. Garlands of rose, stitchwort, sorrel, violet, and anemone decked the inner table borders. Duty cooks and servers bustled about on the outer perimeters, pushing trolleys and carrying trays heaped with culinary delights. Hungry onlookers commented eagerly upon the delightful fare. The two hares, Tarquin L. Woodsorrel and his wife, the Hon Rosie, together with their twelve leverets, wiggled their ears in delight.

“I say, I say, jolly old meadowcream pudden, wot?

“Just lookit those button mushrooms fallin out o that leek an onion

pastie, mdear. Absolutely spiffin!

Hon Rosie was known for her strident laugh, which it was said could curdle cream at great distances. “Whoo-hahahooh! Woodland salad an yellow nutcheese with Abbey dressing, top hole! They mustve known we were comin, Tarkers, wot?

Foremole took his seat, nudging a molefriend. “Yurr, be that turnipntaternbeetroot deepernever pie oi sees, Rungle?

“Ho aye, that et be, zurr, wF damsoncream pudden tfoller, said the other mole, as he polished a small wooden ladle eagerly. “Boi okey, ifn moi mouth waters much more oim afeared oill be drownded, hurr!

Blind Simeon, the ancient mouse Herbalist, and old Mother Mellus, the matriarch badger of Redwall, sat on either side of Saxtus. The Bellmaker was seated next to Mellusall four were close friends. Joseph leaned toward the badger as two hedgehogs passed bearing a tray piled high with freshly baked scones.

“What a delightful aroma, Mellus. Honey and blackberry scones, with maple icing, too. Splendid!

A smile hovered about the badgers silver muzzle. “Youre naught but a flattering fraud, Joseph. You knew I baked them specially for you. They do smell nice, though.

“Those scones will taste twice as good as they smell, said Saxtus, unfolding his table napkin.

The old badger smiled graciously. “How gallant. Thank you, Father Abbot!

“How is it that Im naught but a flattering fraud and Saxtus gets thanked for his gallantry? grumbled the Bellmaker, as he attacked a salad busily.

Mellus ladled fragrant dark gravy over a carrot and scallion pastie and placed it in front of Joseph. “Compliments are like clouds, my friend: very pretty, but if we had to dine on them wed starve. Eat and be thankful.

Looking rather guilty, Saxtus stayed the Bellmakers paw. “Oops. Forgot to say grace. Scuse me, please!

He rang a small bell, specially made for the table by Joseph. All

chatter ceased; silence fell over Great Hall. The Father Abbot arose, solemn faced. He was about to speak when the newly washed orchard guard clattered in through the doorway. With a frown and a paw to her lips, Mellus beckoned them silently to her. They tip-pawed across, Saxtus holding his silence as the badger whispered, “Late for dinner, my little Dibbuns?

A mousebabe piped up indignantly. “Nona our fault; we was sended for a wash after us worked ard inna orchard all day long!

The Dibbuns nodded in unison, backing up their spokesmouse. Melluss huge paws scooped two of them onto her lap. “Now sit quietly the rest of you; not a word until Father Abbot has said grace.

She nodded to Saxtus, who coughed importantly and began:

“Fate and seasons smile on all,

From sunrise to the dark nightfall,

This bounty from both earth and tree,

Was made to share, twixt you and me.

To Mother Nature let us say,

Our thanks, for life and health this day.

There was a mighty Amen. The little bell sounded, and dinner commenced in earnest.

It was a joyous meal for honest creatures. Dishes were passed to be shared, both sweet and savory. October ale and strawberry cordial, tarts, pies, flans, and puddings, served out and replaced by fresh delights from Redwalls kitchens. Turnovers, trifles, breads, fondants, salads, pasties, and cheeses alternated with beakers of greensap milk, mint tea, rosehip cup and elderberry wine. Rufe Brush, the Abbey Bellringer, shared a heavy fruitcake with his friend Durry Quill, hedgehog Cellarkeeper and nephew of the late good old Gabe Quill, from whom he had inherited his duties.

The Abbot watched Joseph leaning back in his chair. “What is it, Bellmaker? he said. “Not hungry?

“Saxtus, when will my dreams be revealed?

“Eat first; talk later. It will happen in good time. Is that a hot scone I

see lying on your plate?

Joseph turned too late; the scone was claimed by the mousebabe sitting on Melluss lap. Joseph blinked. “You little scallywag! I suppose youd like to guard the kitchen baking ovens tomorrow as a change from the strawberry patch.

The mousebabe shook his head and winked furtively. “No, but we guard the winowsill, where cakes an pies be, he said.

Mellus tickled his ribs until he giggled and squirmed. “Oh no you wont, bucko. My pies and cakes are quite safe cooling alone on the windowsills. Though I once recall a certain Abbot when he was a Dibbun, spent three days in sickbay after guarding those windowsills. The greedy little snipdo you remember him, Saxtus?

The Father Abbot of all Redwall applied himself to a plate of summercream pudding, pretending he had not heard.

The evening wore on until the Dibbuns began yawning, one or two coming perilously close to falling facedown upon their plates with drooping eyes. Saxtus stood and rang his little bell.

“Anybeast on dormitory duty, please take the Dibbuns up!

Wails of protest arose from the fretful babes. “Yaah, not fair, snot fair, us allus ave tgo tbed!

“I wish us big uns could go off to bed right now, said Oak Tom, pulling a long face of comic dismay. “We have to stay up and wash pots n pans V dishes clean for morning.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel flapped his ears in agreement. “Indeed, scout, tis a rough old life bein a big un, wot? Praps the Dibbuns arent really sleepy; what say they stay up an help? Bet theyd make jolly good pot washers, eh?

There was a sudden clatter of chairs and benches as the panicked Dibbuns dashed for the stairs yelling, “Gu-night, Father Abbot, night night everybeast. We goin abed! They scampered up the stairs amid peals of laughter.

Flooding evening sunlight had now dimmed to a golden filter, illuminating the tapestry depicting Martin the Warnor which hung upon the wall of Great Hall. Saxtus felt himself arise unbidden from his Abbots chair. He went to stand behind the Bellmaker. A dreamy

feeling he could not explain had cast its mantle over the Abbot; it was as if time and the earth were standing still. A great silence lay upon the big chamber: golden dust motes hung lazily on the still air, gleaming in the last faded yellow sunrays. Amid the tangible hush Red wallers sat immobile, each in their place, like figures captured in eternity upon some vast canvas. Across the peace that lay over all, Saxtus heard his own voice. It was low, yet the sound carried from floor to roofbeam, reaching every shadowed corner of Great Hall.

“My friends, I have something to say to you. Of late Joseph, our Bellmaker, has been thinking deeply about his daughter, Mariel, and her companion, Dandin. I know that all Redwallers remember both those mice with great fondness; I certainly do. Dandin and I were brought up together, like brothers, in tlus very Abbey. Scarcely a day passes when I will not see somewhere we played together, and then I think of him, off on adventures with Mariel the Warriormaid. Alas, there has been no news of them for more than four seasons now. Where are they? I think Joseph may provide us with some help. Last night he was visited in a dream by Martin the Warrior

To Joseph, the Abbots voice behind him sounded like a distant murmur. He had not heard a word that was said. Now that Saxtus had finished speaking, every eye was turned upon the Bellmaker. He sat upright, staring hard at the likeness of Martin upon the tapestry. Saxtus watched himJosephs lips were moving slowly as if he were holding a conversation with somebeast. The room became dark; Saxtus watched as dusk heralded nightfall. The suns final ray reflected through a high window, wreathing the form of Joseph in a fleeting nimbus of light. Saxtus recalled the lines of the rhyme: “At daylights last gleam youll remember.

Then the daylight was gone.

Candles and walltorches burned bright as Joseph stood and looked about him.

“Listen now, and I will speak as Martin the Warrior told me!

It was much cooler among the green hills of the scrubland. Mariel, Dandin, and Bowly took a leisurely lunch from the supplies they had commandeered from the two weasels. The travelers rested, half napping as they lay back on a mossy hillock, listening to the high trill of a skylark backed by the drone of bees and the dry chirrup of grasshoppers. Dandin was the first to hear other noises; shaking himself out of a semi-torpor, he cupped an ear to the light breeze.

“Listen. Can you hear it, Mariel? Sounds like some-beasts doing a bit of roaring and shouting somewhere.

Mariel prodded the sleeping Bowly firmly on his snout. “Stop snoring and do something useful; sit up and tell us what you can hearcome on, dozybones!

The young hedgehog sat up, snuffling and grumbling. “Call yselves friends? Huh, wont even let a young warrior ave is slumber. Youll stunt me growth wakin me like that. Bowly had very sharp hearing, and he assessed the situation in a trice.

“Sounds like some creatures tormentin a mole. See that big hill yonder, third one goin south to the right? I reckons its comin from ahind of there.

Moles were friendly. No one hesitated. Mariel readied her Gullwhacker, and Dandin drew his dagger. Bowly sighed aloud, picking up his two hard oatcakes as he followed them on their way to the big hill. “Time for trouble agin. Mercy me, somebeasts got no consideration at all. Coin gittin theirselves into distress jus when its warriors nappin time!

Bowly was correct. It was a fat old mole in trouble. Six gray rats were trying to bind him with grass ropes. The old creature was giving a good account of himself, but the rats were overwhelming him, prodding him with spears as they looped the coils about him and struggled to get a halter round his neck. Nearby three small young moles were weeping in distress, closely guarded by a seventh rat.

The old mole pulled a paw loose as he roared, “Youm vurmints, oill never tug moi snout to no foxerwulf, ee Squirrelyking be the oandly one oi bow to, hurr!

They had not yet seen the three friends. “Me and Mariel will take the six who have the old fellow, Dandin whispered to Bowly. “Dyou reckon you could deal with that rat guarding the young uns?

Not stopping to answer, Bowly hefted one of his oatcakes and flung it hard with amazing accuracy. It whacked the rat solidly across the jaw, dropping him in a heap. The young hedgehog grinned from ear to ear. “I done that. Dandy. Wot next?

All activity below ceased as the six rats turned to stare up at the intruders. Dandin sighed in resignation. “Bowly, you might have waited until I gave the wordweve completely lost the element of

surprise.

Mariel had her Gullwhacker ready as they strode down to confront the rats. She addressed the one who looked like their Captain. “You, frognose, get your filthy paws off that mole!

The rat leered crookedly at her. “Well, well, what have we here, a little mouseymaid? Whats your name, pretty one?

The Gullwhacker belted him square in the mouth and he sat down hard, spitting out a broken fang. Mariel smiled. “Should have whacked you over the ears; it would have cleared some of the muck from them. I never asked for complimentsI told you to let the mole go.

“Youve just signed your death warrant, mouse, said the rat, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth. “Theres more than seven of us. Youll see! He blew several sharp blasts on a bone whistle which hung from his neck, but before he could blow more, a kick from the old mole felled him. Knowing reinforcements would be arriving promptly, Mariel and Dandin hurled themselves headlong at the remaining five rats.

“Redwaaaaaallllll!

Sheathing his dagger, Dandin tripped the first rat and grabbed the spear from his claws as he fell. Using the spear butt as a club, he set about belaboring the grounded rat furiously. Mariel tangled the footpaws of another in the coils of her Gullwhacker, whipping it free to punish him with the hard knotted end. Bowly leaped on the back of a third rat, striking hard with his remaining oatcake.

Reinforcements arrived in the form of ten more rats dashing over the hill. Mariel saw them coming and rapped out a swift order: “Form foursquare around the little moles. Quick!

They dashed to obey, facing outward with the young moles at their center. Dandin brandished the spear, jabbing. Mariel swung her rope in an arc, daring any rat to step within its range. Bowly and the old mole had picked up spear and sword; growling, they waved the weapons wildly. The rats who had been felled began to recover and rise, hopelessly outnumbering the four defenders. A rat leaped back, sneering, as Dandin jabbed out with his spear.

The Captain whose fang Mariel had knocked out staggered upright, wiping blood from his chin. “Youll wish youd never interfered with Captain Bragglin of Nagrus horde. Hitting me with that rope was the

biggest mistake of your life, mouse!

Some of the rats had bows. They began fitting shafts to their bowstrings in readiness. Dandin shook his head. “Bowly, I told you it was wrong to knock that rat down before we had a chance to size up the situation.

Quivering with anticipation, the rats began slowly closing in on the little party. For the first time Bowlys swaggering attitude deserted him and his voice sounded small and frightened. “Taint much fun bein a warrior; looks like were nigh to gettin ourselves slayed!

Mariel knew Bowlys words to be true. But desperate situations call for reckless remedies: the mousemaid hurled herself into action with lightning ferocity.

Snatching the dagger from Dandins belt she clamped it firmly between her teeth, then, thundering forward, she struck hard, left, right, and center with the Gullwhacker. Totally unprepared for such an aggressive move, several rats were floored by hefty blows. They fell, bumping into : others and knocking arrows awry from bowstrings. For the second time in a short space Captain Bragglin found himself in the path of Mariels weapon. She swung it in a vicious arc, thudding the knot into his stomach. His mouth gaped wide as the breath was belted from him in a loud whoosh. Before the rats had time to recover, Mariel had thrown herself upon their Captain. She held the dagger point at his trembling gullet, roaring wildly, “Dont even think about moving, or this scum dies!

As the attackers froze in their tracks, Bragglin shouted, “Be still, dont make any false moves! Grinj, cover her! The rat called Grinj was an experienced archer. As the rest stood stock-still he slid close to Mariel, an arrow straining against his taut bowstring. Bragglin managed to gasp against the daggertip tickling his throat, “Kill her if she moves this blade a fraction!

Dandin heaved a loud sigh of dismay. It was a standoff. Noontide shimmered over the grass-topped sandhills as both parties stood poised in a silent tableau.

“Thisns a right mess we be gotten into, said Bowly, shooting Dandin a pleading glance. “Wots a warrior supposed to do now, Dandy?

Dandin knew the situation rested on a daggertip and an arrowhead. Squinting up at the high hot orb of the sun he whispered calmly, “Learn patience and obedience, thats the way of the warrior. Dont

show fear, Bowly; stand up straight and wait for the next movebut be ready when it comes!

# XX

Hail the conquering Foxwolfyou drooling idiot! The Urgan Nagru ducked as a bowl clanged against the banqueting chamber door. Wincing with the pain of his injuries, he hobbled to one side as Silvamord flung a three-branched candlestick.

“One day that poisoned tonguell be the death of you, vixen! the Foxwolf snarled dangerously. Limping to his chair, he slumped down and began tugging gingerly with his teeth at a long whitebeam splinter embedded in his paw. Silvamord continued her tirade.

“I could have caught them, but what did you do, clev-erbrush? Tried to drown me in the moat! Nagru the nit-brain, thats you, the fool who chases his own tail!

Nagru spat the splinter at her venomously. “Ahh, give your slobbering mouth a rest, clattergob, letting yourself be pulled out the window by a big, dumb badger!

The rat horde sat in the courtyard, some licking their wounds, others slaking their thirst from the dwindling cellars of the castle. Sounds of furious argument rang out from the banqueting chamber windows high above their heads.

Fillch, one of the rats, looked up from the honey-preserved chestnuts he was sharing with his companion Sourgall. “Big dumb badger, eh? That one didnt need to talk. She slew eight of ours with a tree limb itd take ten of us to lift!

Sourgall had remained behind to fish Silvamord from the moat. He looked Fillch up and down slowly. “Huh, she didnt urt yew, matey. Where were yer? Leadin from beind, Ill bet.

“Aye, an so would yew ave been, bucko. We nearly ad the otter, thatd fought like a madbeast while the others escaped. Then that badger was in the middle of us, swingin an arf of a tree! Where dyer expect me t be, eh? Drigg, Flokky, Big Bragtail an five others got in the badgers way, and they aint around ttell the story no more. You ask Hooktail if ydont believe me. Aint that right, mate?

The rat in question had lost an ear. He was using a poultice of dockleaves bound with earth and water to staunch the wound. “Gaah! he groaned. “Its all right you sittin there makin clever remarks,

Sourgall. You wasnt there. Even the Urgan Nagru took to is paws an limped off like a flogged toad. I tell yer, mate, you wouldnt ave thought it was the same stoopid badger that played nursemaid to the fiddle squirrelbrat. That beast came after us with a full tree in er paws, even though we filled er with arrers like a pincushion!

A rat named Flangor joined the conversation. “Wot dyew suppose FoxwolfII do now, mates?

The one called Riveneye put aside the cider he had been swilling and snorted, “Hah, you should know the Urgan by now, mate. Nagru wont rest til their skulls are bleachin in the sun. Ol Foxwolfll hunt em til e gets every last one in those iron claws. Then we know wot ell do with em, dont we?

A shudder ran through every rat within earshot. They had seen what Nagru did to his captured enemies.

Riveneyes guess was right. Nagru was preparing to hunt the fugitives down. As evening shades drew the hot day to a close, he sat wincing as he flexed his injured limbs. The wolfhide across his back was still littered with whitebeam splinters. Silvamord sat watching him, unmoved by his plight.

The Foxwolf glared at her. “Whatre you staring at now, firogeyes? Make yourself useful; get me a beaker of wine!

“Get it yourself, jellyfish! said the vixen, curling her lip in disdain. “So, an old badger and a single otter thrashed the living daylights out of you and your killers! Tell me again, how many did they slay?

Nagrus eyes blazed pure hatred at her. “They never defeated us; they staggered off so full of arrows and covered with wounds that theyre long dead now. If I hadnt been injured, Id have followed them and skinned their hides off to bring back and show you!

Silvamord laughed humorlessly. “Just like you skinned the wolf that had been frozen dead half a season so that you could take its skin and name? Oh, dont act surprised. I saw you. Ill wager your horde wouldnt be so quick in following you if they knew the truth about the great Ur-gan Nagru.

The iron claws of the Foxwolf shot out, pointing at her. “One word from you, blabbermouth, and Ill rip the tongue from your head and make you eat it. Thats a promise!

“You dont scare me, sneered Silvamord, pouring wine for herself and sipping daintily. “I know you too well. What does bother me is that Queen and her brattheyre still free. Youd do better to get out there and capture them before they raise the whole of Southsward up in arms against us.

Nagru walked carefully over to the table. Pouring himself a beaker of wine, he brought his face close to the vixens. His voice dripped sarcasm. “Thats what I fully intend doing, my beautiful and beloved one. Meanwhile, you can sit here, where you are safe and comfortable. Oh, keep an eye on Gael Squirrelking, will you? I presume you werent silly enough to have killed him in my absence?

Silvamord eyed him levelly. “Gael is not the problem. I had him tossed into one of his own dungeonshe could be dead or alive, I dont care. Now, are you going to hang about here until we both grow old, or are you going to do something about Serena and her little Truffen?

They remained for a moment a hairbreadth apart, eyes locked. Then, as if on an impulse, Nagru strode off to the window. He stared down at the horderats who were lying slumped on the stone courtyard, still warm from the days heat. The Foxwolf brought them scurrying upright as he howled down at them: “Sourgall, you and forty others stay behind on guard! Bladenose, Riveneye, get the rest ready for a hunt! Mingol, Vengro, get my Dirgecallers ready!

The horde kept silent, mentally thanking the fates that they had not been chosen to be in charge of the fearsome Dirgecallers, the Fox wolfs legendary trackers. Mingol and Vengro were speechless, their mouths dry with fear.

Serena and Truffen rested beneath a willow on the streambank, the infant sitting in his mothers lap. Their food lay untouched. Together they watched a comet streaking its brilliant tail across the soft, dark night. Otter patrols swam, sleek and silent, back and forth on the broad stream, alert for any strange sound in their territory.

Greenbeck, a big male, slid smoothly onto the bank beside the squirrels. Dipping a bowl into the steaming pot tof hotroot and watershrimp soup, beloved of otters, he offered it with an encouraging smile. “Cmon, marm, try some. Its good!

Serena averted her eyes from the food. “No, thank you, friend. I cannot bring myself to eat, not knowing if King Gael is alive or dead.

“Good vittles, marm. Eat an the liddle feller will, too. You must take

care o him, Greenbeck persisted, nudging the bowl forward. “Lookit Iris, she dont know whats become o Rab, but she eats to keep up er strength. Iris wont give up ope, an neither should you, if yll excuse me sayin, marm.

Serena smiled wanly at the loyal otter. Taking the soup, she broke fresh barleybread and dipped it in, saying, “Look, Truffen, suppermake you big and strong!

The little fellow ate, staring up at his mothers face. “Where Papa an Uta?

Serena ate to avoid answering the question, but the good food stuck in her throat as tears overflowed on her face. Iris appeared at the Queens side, patting her gently.

“Hush now. Dont let the babe see you upset. Its hard, I know, though I hope that my Rab and your Muta took lots of those murderers with them. Be Like your son, Serena; eat and grow strong. Someday we will return to Castle Floret and avenge our loved ones.

The Squirrelqueen ate, staring into the night-dark stream. “I am not leaving Southsward country. I will stay to stand against Nagru and Silvamord.

Iris sat beside Serena, a worried look on her kind face. “We must leave Southsward nowwe are too few, my friend. One day we shall come back in force; at the moment we would sacrifice our lives needlessly against the Fox wolfs great horde.

Serena remained adamant. “Some help will come to us. I feel it. We must stay and get others in Southsward to support our cause.

“My Rab wanted you and Truffen out of this land, said Iris, shrugging hopelessly. “It has become a place of evil. But if you are determined to stay, then the otters will stay also. I will not desert youwe have always been loyal to your family. Though if we stay, I fear that only death awaits us.

Truffen looked up from his soup. “Stay an make Na-gu dead!

Iris settled down to rest. “Aye, make Nagru dead, little one. Who knows, maybe you an your mama are right. Perhaps there may be warriors we have yet to meet who can help us do just that. I hope they show up soon, whoever they are.

Peace fell over the otter camp. Gently lapping water and the still-warm night had cast its spell over the weary fugitives. Serena and Iris lay side by side with Truffen between them, all three mercifully deep in slumber after the days harrowing events. Truffen would not remember his dream next morning, and even if he did the squirrel-babe was far too young to explain it. A mousemaid who p carried a knotted rope, a strong old gray-bearded mouse carrying a stout stave ... And a great bell tolling aloud me sound of freedom.

Both Mariel and the rat Captain, Bragglin, were in a perilous position. Dandin and his friends stood ready to give up their lives protecting the little moles, while the rat patrol crouched, willing to pounce at their Captains word. Mid-noon heat caused both parties much discomfort; their paws shifted dangerously in the loose sand.

“If anything happens to me, make the moles die slowly! Bragglin called out to his rats.

Mariel kept up her deadly bluff, cutting off further words as she pressed the dagger meaningfully at his I& throat. “Wont do your Captain much good; hell be wormbait, and well take at least half of you with us if you touch those little moles, be warned! The mousemaid could feel the hot sand shifting under her footpaws, and she moved to gain a firmer position.

At that instant Bragglin made his move. He wriggled way from the knife, kicking at Mariel and giving a swift to Grinj. The rat had been standing over Mariel, his wpaw slackened slightly from the long standoff, but he took the hint immediately and stretched the bowstring taut to fire the arrow.

Zzzzz. Clunk!

Grinj fell poleaxed by a smooth, round rock with a hole through its center. It was attached to a thin, toughened line. Grinjs arrow buried itself in the sand alongside the mousemaids eye as a deep, drawling voice called from the hilltop behind her.

“Paws still in the blinkin ranks than! If any of you longtails have half a bally brain, Ill drop you before you can use it! You showah listenin? Thats not just a bloomin order, its a fact!

Mariel watched in amazement as the stone was reeled swiftly in by a hare carrying a long, whippy fishing rod. He caught the stone skillfully as it swung back to him, his hooded eyes never once leaving the scene below. Holding the slack of the line in check, he whipped

the slender rod back and forth, and the air hummed to its vibrations. Suddenly Bragglins paw grasped that of Mariel as he tried to wrest the dagger from her.

Zzzzzzz. Thonk!

With a swift, vicious flick the hare cast the stone deftly. The breath caught in Mariels throat. Bragglin lay slain, the flying rock squarely between his eyes.

“You chaps never learn, do yen? Didnt believe me, eh? Right, whos next?

The rats dropped their weapons as they gaped up at the curious hare. Young Bowly Pintipss mouth hung wide; he had never witnessed such a splendid-looking beast.

The hare was old and overweight, but obviously every inch a veteran warrior; his regalia proclaimed it proudly for all to see. On his head he wore a tricorn hat, with holes cut to allow his ears to pop out. It was surmounted by the most elaborate white drooping plume. Though his cheeks were pouched and baggy, the eyes that shone above them were hooded and sharp. His whiskers had been waxed and curled into a perfect handlebar moustache. He wore a faded but gaudy pink mess jacket, decorated with arrays of medallions and ribbons. He had epauletted shoulders and a front twinkling with polished silver buttons. Stowing the rod away like an elongated pace stick, he gave a cough and a nod. Four young leveret hares in quaint green uniforms nipped smartly out of the surrounding grass and saluted him. He acknowledged them with a wave of one ear.

“Righto, quick as ylike now, squad. Pick up all weapons an lay those rats facedown where theyre no bother to anybeast ...

One of the leverets sprang forward but skidded to a halt at a fierce glare from his superior.

“Whatve I told you, laddie buck? Wait for it, wait for it Right, go to it, squad ... Move!

The young hares scurried about gathering up all weapons. One was about to relieve Dandin of his spear when he caught the stern eye of his elder.

“Teh, ten! Cant ytell the good chaps from the rotters, Runtwold? Leave that mouses weapon alone, sah!

Pulling off his hat, he strode ponderously down the hill. Bending a leg in front of Mariel, he bowed with a totally overdone flourish. “Field Marshal Meldrum Fallowthorn at yservice, marm. Though me reputation oft precedes me, no doubt youve heard mname bandied about hither and yon, wot?

Mariel could only shake her head.

“Whats this? Theres a thing! said the hare, raising his eyebrows. “Never heard of old Meldrum the Magnificent? Astoundin! Never mind, mdear, you will!

Introductions were in order all around. The moles thanked their rescuers profusely, the old one tugging his snout respectfully to the warriors who had saved them.

“Burrhurr, thankee koindly, guddbeasts. Oi be Furpp Straightfurrer, an these yurr hinfants be moi daughters lotBurdill, Grumbee, an Porgoo, Straightfurrers all. Bid ee gennelbeasts good day, moles.

The three little ones tugged their snouts politely. “Good arternoon, zurrs! Foin day, marm!

Meldrum turned his attention to the rats lying with their noses pressed into the sand. “Now then, yblaggards, up on those paws smart I ike. One, two, hup!

The rats did as they were bidden with alacrity. Meldrum prodded one in the stomach with his rod butt. “Now listen hard, ygreat stinker. Im promotin you pro tern offisah of this mob. See that hill yonder? Well, if you aint all over it an1 gone in two flicks of me eye, Ill make rat pudden with the lot of yah, understand?

The rat nodded, knowing his life depended on it.

Meldrum signaled to his leveret squad and Mariels group. “Weapons at the ready, shoot at will if they dont move quick enough. Aim for between the shoulder blades. Righto, attention, verminon my command of run, youll flippin well run for ylives. Got it? Good, ready ... Run!

Sand scattered in all directions as the terrified rats fled, stumbling helter-skelter over the hill. In an amazingly short time, they were gone from sight. Field Marshal Meldrum Fallowthorn sniffed disdainfully. “Rats! Nevah could abide the rottersnasty, sly, an not a scrap of guts or discipline in any of em!

Bowly stood goggling at the array of decorations jingling and rattling on the Field Marshals tunic. “Gwaw! A real, live warrior. Wot dyew get all those medals for, sir?

Meldrums chest swelled, and he gave Bowly a swift wink. “Battles, young hog, mlad. Thats what a chap earns these gongs for. Thisn was the Eastern Campaign, an the big star here I got for subduin a stoat uprisin. Hah, made those blighters jump I can tell yeh! See these colored bars? Earned em for wallopin weasels up north. This here special silver shield was for biffin the daylights out of a snake, most arrogant adder I ever met, a real boundah! Now, about this golden crescent with a ferret straddlin it ...

The young leveret Runtwold whispered to Mariel and Dandin, “Good ol Uncle Mel. Were his nephews, yknow. He makes all those medals an awards em to himself, but only when he thoroughly earns em. The old fellahs a top-hole warrior an a real toff!

Furpp gestured in the direction of a hill to the west. “Burr, cn oi offer ee guddbeasts summ afreshment, baint much, tho youm be welcumm tmoi dwellin t share et.

Meldrum donned his hat and, pulling his ears through the holes, he signaled his squad into line. “Refreshments! I say, thats rather civil of you, old molechap. Bibntuck-ers me favorite exercise. Lead on!

Furpps dwelling was actually a hill, hollowed out and shored up with rock and timber, dark and cool after the hot noon sun. An entire mole colony lived there. Furpp was obviously the tribal patriarch. He gave them drinking bowls, brimming with a cold cordial of pennycloud and wild barley sweetened with honey. The leveret squadRuntwold, Coltvine, Thurdale, and Foghilldrank deeply, shuffling with anticipation as they watched wood platters being piled high with cold sliced deepernever pie, garnished with hogweed and dandelion salad dressed with crowfoot and garlic mustard. Meldrum the Magnificent shifted huge quantities as he planned his next decoration.

“Hmm, two rats slain an about sixteen vanquished. Lemme see. I think maybe two small silver rats, rampant over a black ribbon with sixteen yellow stripes should fill the bill. Foghill, pour some of that cordial for my chum Bowly.

The young hare saluted casually. “Right ho, Uncle Mel!

The Field Marshals ears shot up stiffly. “Improper form, sah. Youre on a fizzer, young Foghill! I charge you with addressin a superior offisah

as uncle. Penalty, polish all me medals before ybunk down tonight! You know the regulations, laddie buck: Im either Sir, or Field Marshal, or Meldrum the Magnificent. Next one I catch callin me Uncle Mel or Nunky, Ill have his ears for breakfast an his tail for tea. That clear, squad? Good, as ywere. Carry on victuallin up!

There were so many moles introduced to the visitors that they soon gave up trying to remember names. The dwelling was very homey, and every comfort was lavished upon them. Furpp invited the rescuers to stay for the night and they gladly accepted, though later Mariel slightly regretted her decision. Every nook and cranny of the dwelling, throughout its various side chambers and alcoves, was packed with multitudes of sleeping moles. They snored and snuffled, sleepwalked, and some of them even argued or sang in their slumbers. The dwelling became oppressively close. Mariel and Dandin, stepping carefully over the sleepers, made their way outside to sleep in the fresh air.

They strolled around the hill, noticing how the dwelling entrance was carefully concealed between a large rock and some thick brush. The gentle breezes constantly shifted the dry sand and smoothed over any traces of paw-prints leading to Furpps home. They came upon Furpp and Meldrum lounging outside, they too having deserted the packed chambers for the soft, starred outdoors. The four sat down in the warm sand, discussing the days events in low tones. Meldrum had already been apprised of the situation by Furpp, and he was not happy.

“Too many of those confounded rats in Southsward now. I got back from me campaignin an travelin too late; the bally place is swarmin with em. That lot today arent the only ones Ive run into; Ive seen patrols everywhere. Now Furpp tells me that me old friends Gael Squirrelking an his good ladywife had the very throne pulled out from under em by invaders an villains. Couple of foxbeasts, I hear. Ones said to be half wolf. Tchah! The ruffianll be half dead if he ever crosses my trail. Actually, I was on me way to Castle Floret with the squad when I bumped into you chaps. What dye say, care to join us?

Mariel exchanged a grim nod with Dandin before answering, “Were with you! After what we saw today of those filthy rats, Dandin and I are game for anything that will rid the land of them and their evil kind!

“Baint that easy, zurrs, said Furpp Straightfurrer, shaking his head. “Youm oanly seed but a few of Foxen-wolfers orde. Gurt boatloads of ee vurmints came to this land, moren ee leaves in autumn winds. Ho

urr, theym be too aplenty furr the loikes of us n s to cope wi.

Meldrum the Magnificent sniffed as he twirled his waxed mustachios. “Balderdash! Quality counts, old lad, not quantity. Proved it meself many a time. What dyou think these medals are for, cleanin me porridge bowl an goin to bed early?

“Not so hasty, Meldrum, Dandin spoke up on Furpps side. “Dashing deeds and dead heroes would be a sad fact in the face of a horde such as our friend Furpp described. Mayhap we should be a bit careful and take a closer look before rushing madly in.

“Indeed! Meldrum said, wiggling his ears huffily. “Took the very words out o me mouth, young feller. Proceed with extreme caution, then wallop em when the times ripe, thats what I always say!

Mariel could see Meldrum was in a touchy mood. She ended the meeting by yawning and stretching. “I suggest we sleep on it; were all tired and need a rest.

Meldrum loosened his tunic buttons. “Of course, tucker first, shuteye next, then action! Eat, sleep n fight in that order, always been me motto. Glad I thought of it, wot?

Suppressing a giggle, Mariel lay down saying, “I dont know where wed be without your wise counsel, sir.

Meldrum peered hard at her in the darkness. “Tell you somethin else, missie. Better off sleepin out here under the stars, wot? Dreadful fellers for snorin these motes, an those young neph, er, troops of mine, sound like a pack of hogs in a truffle patch. Advise beddin down outside, earth for ybed, sky for a blanket an all that. Capital stuff!

Dandin yawned and closed his eyes. “Well take your word for it, Meldrum.

The old hare hit the ground with a resounding thud, nestling his head into a grass tussock. “Sensible creature, I can see were goin to get on well tgether. Gnight, chaps!

He was instantly asleep. After suffering an hour of his stentorian snores, Mariel, Dandin, and Furpp crept around to the other side of the hill. The old mole stuffed grass into his ears as he commented, “Hurr, oi cn ear Meldum a snoren from yurr, ee could win a gurt fat medal ftirr snorin, thatn be a champiun, burr aye!

Dandin drifted off to sleep, wondering how his old friend Saxtus was coping as Abbot of Redwall, and his companions, Durry, Rufe, and the other good Abbey comrades, Mother Mellus and Simeon. Were they still well and happy, enjoying a long, peaceful Mossflower summer? A wave of longing for his old home swept over him. What was he doing here, four seasons away from the Abbey he had been brought up in, going off to fight some other beasts war? Then he thought of Mariel, the truest mousemaid he had ever stood alongside, through thick and thin over many adventures, trekking, eating, thinking, and fighting together in all manner of strange places, making new friends and fighting many enemies.

A smile passed across the face of the sleeping mouse warrior. This was the life; he would not have had it any other way.

Candles cast their warm flickering glow over the tables, sending long shadows into the comers of Great Hall. Father Abbot Saxtus dipped his quill pen in the ink; a long bark parchment lay on the table before him. Though the night was late, his duties as Recorder were required. Every Redwaller sat silent, the food at table forgotten, as Joseph the Bellmaker stood to relate his dream of the previous night. The words sprang unbidden to his lips.

“All day I have been struggling to recall the message Martin the Warrior gave to me as I slept, but I could remember nothing until now. So, friends, I will tell you about the dream as it happened.

“Martin guided my mind through a far country. It looked peaceful and warm, but 1 could feel fear, the fear of the creatures who live there. I also felt the presence of evil, a shadow loomed, like that of a big animal, a large fox maybe, or even a wolf! Then I heard Martin speak.

Birds of cloth that fly oer water,

Guide trees of the forest through the sea,

Where a snake begins, find thy daughter,

Go now, turn thou, due to my plea.

Joseph paused. The only sound to be heard was the scratch of Saxtuss pen, who then said, “Thank you, Joseph, Ive got that. Is there more?

The Bellmaker continued to narrate what he had dreamed. “Oh yes, there is much more. Martin faded from my mind and I saw Mariel and Dandin, as clear as I can see you, my friends. They were repeating a

verse together.

Five will ride the Roaringburn,

But only four will eer return.

Urgan sits in Gaels Royal House,

Warriormaid and Warriormouse,

Say hasten, and give aid.

Immediately a murmur arose from the assembled Red-wallers.

“Five are to go. Which five?

“The rhyme never said?

“Aye, but only four will come back; thats what he said!

Simeons stick rapped the tabletop sharply. “Silence, please, friends! he said. “You must wait until Joseph has finished speaking.

The Bellmaker bowed slightly to the blind Herbalist. “Thank you, Simeon. I have not much more to say now. My dream ended with many images, swirling water, flames, the sounds of battle, and above all the voice of Martin calling aloud:

Bellringer whod love to stay,

Go! With cellarhog, I say,

Laughing flowr with eye of hawk,

Digger who would rather walk,

Fathermouse with beard of gray,

Five from Redwall go, away! “

Saxtus stopped writing and looked over his spectacles. “There! I feel that you have finished, Bellmaker?

“I can remember no more, Father Abbot! said Joseph as he took his seat. He looked tired.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel loaded up his platter with salad and a mushroom turnover, then, pouring himself a beaker of October ale, he

smiled brightly and said, “Righty ho! Well done, sir! Now lets get down to solving the mystery an unravelin those riddles, wot?

Mother Mellus shook her grizzled head. “Youd stay up all night as long as there was food on the table, wouldnt you?

“Mmf snnch glomff, scuse me! the gluttonous hare spoke around a mouthful of food. “An1 whats wrong [ with that, may I ask? Chap needs his nosebag yknow!

Sister Sage wagged a reproving paw at him. “Cant you see Joseph is tired? Father Abbot, too? No consid-ieration for otherbeasts, thats your trouble!

Simeon could not help smiling as he tapped gently on ie table with his stick. “Now now, I think we are all tired; the hour grows late. Perhaps it would be best if we slept on Josephs words.

“Wise counsel, my friend, said Saxtus, seconding Simeons suggestion. “Tomorrow our minds will be refreshed, when we have had rest and time to think.

The Redwallers rose from their seats in a body, all save Tarquin, who carried on with his extended dinner. His wife, the Hon Rosie, ruffled his ears fondly. “You carry on, old lad; save a lot of clearing up, wot?

Tarquin rescued the remains of a heavy fruitcake. “Thank you, mdear. Beautiful and jolly understandin toomade a wise decision when I chose you. Snch grmff mmm! Mustve had a good meal before I met you, eh!

Rosie allowed Simeon to lean on her paw as they went upstairs to the dormitories. “Thats my Tarkers for you, always payin me compliments, she said. “Er, that was a compliment, wasnt it?

Dawn was up and a beaming sun was drying the dew from lawn and orchard. It promised the Abbey dwellers another fine, long summer day. Breakfast was a picnic affair, set out on the west wall steps by the main gate. Brother Fingle and Durry Quill set hot apple scones and cool mint tea on the grass at the foot of the steps. Sister Sage and Brother Mallen wheeled a trolley up the path, its small log wheels almost buckling under the weight of bowls piled with fresh fruit salad. They were surrounded by whooping Dibbuns. Sage waved a ladle threatening the little invaders, and they dodged around, grabbing a slice of the freshly cut fruit whenever a chance presented itself. Mother Mellus intervened. “Get out of it, you scamps! Listen, if you all

go up on the wall and guard the battlements, Ill have breakfast sent up to you. How does that sound?

A mousebabe thought for a moment, narrowing his eyes fiercely as he weighed the proposition. “Wanna lotta brekkist; it be ard work up there!

A deal was struck and the Dibbuns fled, yelling war-cries, to the west walltop. Brother Mallen shook with laughter. “Guard the wall? Hahaha! Theyd have to get ladders to see over the battlements!

Saxtus sat on the grass with his back to the wall, noting the excited faces of those around him.

“Well, good morning, Redwallers. I see that some of you have already solved a puzzle or two. No doubt you may know the names of the five whom Martin chose.

Durry Quill came dashing up and, throwing himself flat, he kicked all four paws in the air. “Me! Me! Im the cellarhog in the rhyme. Im goin!

Joseph merely smiled and shrugged. “Me, too, unless theres another Fathermouse with beard of gray in our Abbey.

Mellus ambled up and sat beside him. “Nobeast has more right to go than you, Beilmaker. Your daughter is one of the two all the fuss is about, she said. “I only wish I were spry and young enough to go with you; Id seek out Dandin. I brought that young rogue up from the time he was a Dibbun. Huh, Id still scrub his ears if he were here today. Rufe Brush, whats wrong? Mellus had been watching the young squirrel closely.

Rufe blinked back a tear which was threatening to fall. “Bellringer whod love to staycouldnt be nobeast but me, could it? Ive never been outside of Redwall, really, dont want to either. The Abbeys my home, an I love it here.

Durry threw a comforting paw around his friend.

“Cheer up, Rufey. Itll be a great adventure. Ive been on adventures before, youll enjoy it. Im your matey, aint I? Well stick together, men you. Rufe n Durry, Durry n Rufe, eh!

The young squirrel scrubbed a paw across his eyes and sat close to Durry. “And well come back home to Red-wall together, too!

Mellus turned her attentions to Foremole. He was shaking his velvety head to and fro, murmuring to himself, “Ho urr, lack a day, zurr Marthen ee said oim tgo.

Joseph looked with surprise at the mole. “Of course! Digger who would rather walkthats you!

Foremoie continued shaking his head. “Oi wishes et wurrnt, zurr. Wem be goin aboard a boat, oi feels et in moi diggen claws. Bohurr, oid rather walk anywhurrs than sail on ee boat. Oim gurtly afeared o drownen. But if Marthen says et, then oim bound tgo!

Joseph smiled as he took the heavy digging claw Fore-mole extended to him. “Bravely said; we will need your logic and strength. Now, I wonder who the fifth one is, laughing flower with eye of hawk. Perhaps it is Tree-rose?

Oak Toms pretty wife shook her head. “Not me. But I can tell you who I think it iswatch! She crept over to the bottom step where Hon Rosie was sitting. Stealing up behind her, Treerose tickled the hares long eartips. Rosie exploded. “Whoohahahooh! I say, stoppit! Whoo-hahahooh!

Treerose stopped. “There she is. Rose Woodsorrel, the laughing flower! Though I dont know about her having an eye like a hawk.

Hon Rosie stiffened her ears indignantly. “Eye of hawk? Hawkeye! I say, thats what old Colonel Clary used to call me when I was in the Long Patrol. Im absolutely top hole with any sort of weapon yknow: bow n arrows, slings, javelins, hit anythin you name. Dead on target, first time!

Recognition suddenly dawned on Rosie and she burst out afresh. “Whoohahahooh! Oh I say, the thingummy, the rhyme, it meant me! What a wheeze, you chaps, Im goin with you!

Rosies husband, Tarquin, drew himself up huffily. “Steady on there, old gel! Do I take it that you intend swannin off an leavin me here with our young uns?

Rosie was an excellent mother and she loved Tarquin dearly. But being caught up in the throes of an adventure appealed to her wild spirit. “Got to do what Martin the bally Warrior commands, old lad! She saw Tarquins ears droop miserably and relented. “But if youre against it, mdear, then I wont go!

Knowing both hares well, Joseph came up with a ploy. “Youre right, Tarquin. Here at Redwall with the young ones and your good self, thats the proper place for Rosie! Of course, this changes everything. I was thinking of giving my duties as menu setter and food taster to you, Tarquin. Mellus would look after your young leverets, give mem a bit of Abbey schooling, theyd make friends and get a good education. Right, Mellus?

The badger caught Josephs wink and agreed. “Indeed is. Oh, then theres also the temporary Cellarkeepers fades. Im sure Durry needs some reliable beast to check on all his cellar stock. October ale, strawberry fizzgot to be tasted each day and kept at the right temperature.

“Nt that right, Durry?

The hedgehog caught on to the ruse and he nodded firmly. “Need somebeast with a good stomach for sam-plin an checkin. Cellar should be cool n quiet in the summer.

Tarquin L, Woodsorrel set his jaw in a decisive jut. “Who said you couldnt go, mdear, eh? Show me the curmudgeon an Ill give him two pieces of me mind! Our young uns need schoolin. Never hurt anybeast. Now not another blinkin word, Rosie. Youre goin! Oh I know its a jolly hard sacrifice, but Ill stay right here. Samplin ale n cordial, tastin grub an makin menus. Dont you fret, my beautiful gigglin blossom. Ill keep mself busy. You nip off; the breakll do you good!

Laughter and applause greeted Tarquins noble offer. Saxtus tapped the parchment whereon he had recorded all.

“Listen to this, and see if any beast can make it clear.

Birds of cloth that fly oer water,

Guide trees of the forest through the sea ...

Simeon interrupted the poem. “I solved that last night-its simple to a blind one who has had to have things described to him all his life. Trees of the forest going through the seathats a ship; the white birds of cloth are its sails, they guide and propel the ship through water.

Joseph shook his head in admiration. “Well done, Simeon! Read the other two lines, Saxtus.

“Where a snake begins, find thy daughter, Go now, turn thou, due to my plea.

The Abbot looked at the Bellmaker. “Turn thou, Joseph!

Joseph did as he was bid; standing up, he turned around. “Done that. Now what do I do?

Simeon shook with silent laughter. The Abbot glared in his direction. “This is no laughing matter, my friend!

The blind mouse took a little time to compose himself. “Sorry, Saxtus, but I did hear Joseph actually stand and turn then. Thats what I was laughing at. Youve got it all wrong; the rhyme means that you turn the word thou.

Saxtus thought about it for a moment, then he tried. “Uoth! Whats that supposed to mean?

“Try turning it a bit more, switch the letters O and U around.

“Outh? Still means nothing.

Simeon took a sip of his mint tea. “It wont until you find where a snake begins.

The Abbot looked puzzled. “At its tail, I suppose. Thats where all snakes begin.

“Oh really! the blind Herbalist snorted impatiently. “Im Simeon, that begins with S. Youre Saxtus; that begins with 5. Now what does snake begin with? An 5!

Saxtus still looked blank. “Im sorry, Simeonyouve tost me. Could you explain it all?

Simeon spoke in a slow and patient tone. “Put the letter S with the word outh and you have South. Due South! Martin is pleading with you to sail due south! Saxtus swept the cup from Simeons paw and gave it to Rufe. “Mint tea is no fitting drink for a genius. Rufe take this to the cellars and fill it with the finest old blackberry wine, for a blind mouse who can see further than any beast in Redwall Abbey. Simeon, accept my humble congratulations!

Long into the afternoon they labored at the final verse, Joseph reading it over and over:

“Five will ride the Roaringburn, But only four will eer return, Urgan sits in Gaels Royal House, Warriormaid and Warriormouse, Say hasten, and give aid.

Rufe Brush repeated the second line. “But only four will eer return? Will one of us die, Durry?

The hedgehog shook his spiky head. “Pay it no eed, Rufey. Well take care o each other. Besides, it may be a trick line. Martin the Warrior always says one thing an means another. Dont you worry, mate.

“Durrys rightno use wondering how a journey will finish before you start it, said Mellus, as she passed Rufe a cup of cider. “Warriormaid and Warriormouse must be Marie! and Dandin, as you said, Joseph, and you must hasten and give aid to them. But what do the other lines mean?

Hon Rosie gave a careless shrug. “Five riding the Roaringburn and Urgan sittin in Gaels Royal House, wot? Whats a Roaringthingy and whats an Urgan or a Gael, even if they do have a Royal bally House? We either know or we dont, an take it from me, chaps, I certainly dont! Never was much good in the brainbox department, but Im frightened of nothin. So why worry about it, eh?

Simeon rose slowly, straightening up his old frame with a grimace. “Thats the wisest thing Ive heard all day, Rosie.

Joseph stood and offered his paw for Simeon to lean on. “Right! Weve got the five and we know which direction to travel. Thats good enough for me! Tomorrow at first light we set out to find Mariel and Dandin!

# 8

The dead heat of a still summer night was rudely broken. Columns of gray rats, armed to the fangs with all manner of weaponry, flooded out of Castle Floret. Nagru was abroad with his horde, out to hunt down Serena, her son, and their otter allies. The Foxwolf and his Captains led the army out across the valley floor, speeding their trot to a run as they raced up the wooded tor. Bringing up the rear was a cage. Six rats with cross-hilted pikes pushed it from behind, while up front, sweaty with fear, Mingol and Vengro pulled on the towing ropes. The wheeled cage rattled forward with the two rats tugging in panic, keeping the ropes taut to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the occupants of the close-barred prison cage.

Thrusting his paws into the metal-sheathed wolf claws, Nagru threw back his head, baying a hunting call to the night sky.

“O w w wooooorrrr!

Like an icy wind it chilled the blood of every horderat. The Urgan Nagru, their master the Foxwolf, was out with his Dirgecallers to taste blood. Stumbling and clanking amid weapons and arms, the lead platoons crested the hill, grinding to a breathless, quivering halt at their Captains signals. Leaving the escape trail of Serena and the otters clear, they dispersed into the surrounding woodland. There they concealed themselves in many places, some even climbing up into the trees. Trembling with terror and exertion, Mingol and Vengro arrived with the cage. Nagru dismissed them with a growl, and they fled thankfully into the thickets with the others.

The Foxwolf drew two scraps of cloth from his belt. One was a torn kerchief which had belonged to Queen Serena, the other a feeding bib of Truffens. The barred cage door faced head-on to the path taken by the fugitives. Nagru dangled the pitiful rags against the cage door, chanting in a singsong voice:

“Ho, Dirgecallers, swift and sleek, You shall have your share. Fangs will rip and blood will leak, Scent your victims. There!

He jumped back laughing as the bits of fabric were snatched inside the bars. The cage began reverberating; eerie screamlike growls mingled with the rake of scratching claws and grinding teeth. Shreds of ripped cloth flew from the madly buffeting pen. Fascinated and fearful, the

horderats peeked from their hiding places at the spectacle. The Urgan Nagru gave a throaty chuckle, enjoying the sight of his Dirgecallers working themselves into a blood frenzy as they took the scent of their quarry. The wolfhide swirled out, starlight pinpointing Nagrus metal claws. He called to his horde:

“What is black and what is red?

The answer echoed back from the trees and bushes.

“Night is black and blood is red!

Placing a claw on the cage latch he shouted:

“What is the color of death?

The reply rang out to the dark skies.

“Foxwolf and his Dirgecallers know the color of death!

The cage door sprang open with a clang, and the Dirgecallers came bounding out.

Brought across seasons of heaving seas from the lands of ice by Nagru, maddened through a life of confinement, crazed from lack of live prey, two fully grown female ermine snuffled and wailed. Sleek maniac killers both, glazed red eyes shining against the dull brown of summer coats, teeth white as snow and sharp as spikes. Flexing claws as black as their tailtips, the two predators intertwined sinuously, weaving together into a perilous blur of teeth, claws, and eyes. The Dirgecallers suddenly went rigid, then with an earsplitting wail they sped off down the trail into the darkness. Nagru charged after them, his whole being suffused by their bloodlust.

“Theyve found the scentthe hunt is on! Ooowwooorrr!

Bush, shrub, and flower were trampled underpaw as the horde chased their savage master and his trackers; masses of armed rats thundered out along the trail. Then their cries died into the distance. The scene that moments ago had echoed to chaos regained its silence, and the lonely tor slipped back into the deep of night. In the hour before dawn, Serena found herself shaken into wakerulness by Iris. She picked Truffen up as the otter hustled them both to the streambank.

“Hurry, Serena. It will not be safe here soon. Get aboard this log!

The Squirrelqueen and her son hopped aboard the broad trunk of a dead fir lying in the shallows. Faint noises from afar floated on the predawn breeze. Serena rubbed sleep from her eyes, asking, “Iris, what is it? Where are we going?

Greenbeck s strong head broke the surface by the log. “The Foxwolf is comin this way, marm, huntin with a full pack. Hell find this place by dawn, but dont fret yoreself; well take you somewheres safe by water. Thatll put is foul snout off the scent. Stream water dont leave many tracks to follow; otters know that!

Truffen was still asleep aboard the broad log. Serena covered him with her cloak, lying alongside him as the quiet waters rippled by. Powered by a small contingent of otters, the fir trunk swept onward smoothly. Greenbeck and his friend Troutlad held a murmured conversation as they swam with the log.

“Squirrelqueens goin tget erself an the liddle un captured ifn she dont leave Southsward, mark my words, matey. That scum Nagru wont rest til theyre both slain.

“Aye, thats true. But you card er. Shes stayin put. Trouble is, wheres a good cove to ide em?

“Ifn we puts Nagru off their scent Iris should take em to ole Furpps dwellin in the mounds by the wastelands. Theyll be snug n safe enough there, I reckons.

Iriss head popped up between them. “Stow the gab and save your energy for pushin. Hear that!

Greenbeck blew stream water from his nostrils. “Sounds like moren rats in our wake ...

“Wonder whats makin that awful wailin din? Troutlad said as he began shoving the trunk faster. “Come on mate, put yore back into it an lets get movin!

Serena stared anxiously back over her shoulder, pulling little Truffen close. Her teeth chattered with fright at the unearthly, dirgelike wails of the pack that were on the trail of her and the babe.

It was a bright blue summer morn when the questers and a party of well-wishers left Redwall Abbey. Above the breeze the sky was ridged with high white clouds, patterned like rippled sand after the tide leaves a beach. Many Redwallers had turned out to march along with

the five to the River Moss. They lined the banks, passing supplies from paw to paw to the shrews aboard four log-boats. Abbot Saxtus embraced the shrew Chieftain warmly.

“Log-a-Log, old friend, thank you for the warmth and help you have always shown to us.

Log-a-Log brushed aside the compliment modestly. “Aye, Guosim, the Guerrilla Union of Shrews in Moss-flower, thats us, always here to help our chums. But lets go over these plans again, Father Abbot. You say that Ive got to take your five to the sea in our logboats. Fair enough, but what happens then?

Saxtus hemmed and hawed as he filled a beaker with October ale for the shrew, knowing he was about to ask rather a lot from the Chieftain of the Guosim. “Er, well, haha, hmmm, its rather hard to explain ...

Log-a-Log sipped his ale, both eyes never leaving Saxtus. “Come on, spit it out, Saxtus. What dyou really want?

Plucking up courage, the Abbot ventured forth on his tale, from the night of Josephs dream. Log-a-Log sat swirling the ale in his beaker as he listened open-mouthed to the strange story. When Saxtus had finished he looked hopefully at the shrew, asking, “Well, my old friend, what do you say?

Log-a-Log sat silent awhile, watching his quarrelsome tribe of Guosim shrewssmall, spiky furred, each wearing a colored headband, broad belt, and short rapier. They argued and fought constantly, over who would sit where, which paddle was to be wielded by one or another, how best to stow the supplies and accommodate the passengers. Their gruff bass voices and aggressive manners marked them indelibly as Guosim shrews. Log-a-Log shook his head.

“Adventures, quests, battles, and the seasons knows what! Thats just what my tribe needs; theyre getting too fat and argumentative sittin on the riverbank fishin their days away. But Im afraid we dont have what you want, Saxtus. Let me explain. A shrew logboat is fine for rivers, streams, and big lakes, but you couldnt put to sea in one. Theyre not built big or strong enough to stand high seas, waves, or gales. A good stormd send our logboats straight to the bottom. Thats the truth, friend.

Saxtus was crestfallen. All the hopes and plans of Red-walls five questers had been dashed by Log-a-Logs announcement. Then the

shrews eyes twinkled merrily, and he slapped the Abbots back soundly.

“Cheer up, old frogfeatures. I didnt say I wouldnt help, did I? Theres moren one way of shellin an acorn. Hah! Imagine trying to leave the Guosim out of adventures an battles and so on!

Saxtus immediately brightened up. “Youre going to help us, he said. “I knew we could count on you!

Log-a-Log stood up, resting both paws on his large belt. “Aye, what well need is a real ship, and I happen to know just the creature wholl get us one. Bear in mind, a ship needs a proper crew, watershrews, not landlubbers. Anyway, dont worry; me and the Guosimll be going along for the voyage. Now dont go pestering me with more questionsIve got work to do before we get under way. Hi, Bandle! What dyou think yore doin with those casks? Put em abaft of the bundles in the stern of my boat. Patch! Make that headrope secure or somebeastll fall in the water trying to get aboardtighten the back-spring, too!

He strode off issuing orders left and right, leaving Saxtus to join the rest in bidding farewell to the five travelers. Log-a-Logs shrews were getting more quarrelsome and impatient to be off, so most of the Redwallers good-byes were shouted as they ran along the banks when the log-boats paddled off.

“Youm taken gurt care of eeself, zurrs. Doant fall in ee hocean, burr no, tis vurry wetten!

“Have a super time, Rosie old gel. Dont fret over the young unsIll look after the blighters. Oh, an try not to laugh too much. Those shrew chappies, yknow, pretty short-tempered an not too jolly, wot?

“Ive packed October ale aplenty for ye Durry, think of yore ole pals when you sup it!

“Dont worry about the bellringing, Rufe. Well all take turns. Be good and come home safe!

“Joseph, ole mate, next time I see that grizzly gob of yourn Id like to see Marie! kissin it. Good luck, mate!

“Cheerio mater, pip pip an all that. Bring us back somethin tasty to eat, toodle pip!

Blind Simeon spread both paws wide, his reedy voice carrying on the breeze: “Fortune, fates and fair seasons be with you, may the spirit of Martin guide and guard you all!

The cries grew fainter and dimmer as the logboats picked up the center current and swept away, sped skillfully on by the paddles of Log-a-Logs tribe.

Joseph sat in the prow of Log-a-Logs boat, listening to the shrew Chieftain.

“Finnbarr Galedeep, theres a rogue for you. If any-beast can get us a ship, he can. You ever met a sea otter, Joseph?

“Never, though Ive heard tell of them. Whats this Finnbarr Galedeep like?

Log-a-Log dug his paddle deep, chuckling. “Oho, youll find out soon enough, my friend!

Day turned into night and back again twice as the four logboats sped downstream traveling seaward. Overhanging trees, resounding with Mossflower birdsong, cast speckled shade and gave way to shimmering water meadows and silent green fields. The fields changed gradually into high, sun-warmed banks where yellow-horned poppy, purslane, and pink-flowered thrift were visited by bees, as they danced gently with the breeze. Peaceful and ancient, the landscape skimmed quietly by. Guosim shrews were not so quarrelsome once they were waterbome and paddling awhile. Often they would break out into river shanties, gruff bass voices resounding into the countryside

“I was bom on a stream and fed from a paddle, Shrum a doo rye ey, shrum a doo rye ey, And here Ill stay til me tail dont waggle, See longweeds grow where the currents flow, Aye thats the way I like it soooooooooooo. Shrum a doo rye ey, shrum a doo rye ey, Ho run you river, run my way, Ho ummm, Ho ummmm, Ho ummmm!

The final daybreak of their voyage found Hon Rosie wakened from a cramped position. “Oohh! I feel like a jolly old frog in a jug, wot? I say, though, the old footpaws are rather warm n comfy.

“Burr aye, theym should be, marm. Ee ben sticken em daown moi ears all noight long. Hurr!

Foremole pulled himself up to enjoy the spectacle of dawn across the dunes. Powderblue skies were barred by rollers of pearl gray clouds,

their tops tinged apricot and rose by a sun rising in the east. Sounds of waves and seabirds stirred Rufe from his slumber. He lay still as the logboats nosed aground in a sandy cove, twixt two high dunes at the shore edge. “Are we in the sea, Durry? he asked.

The hedgehog splashed over the side into the shallows. “Bless yer eart no, Rufe. This eres still the stream. Well ave to trek across the shore to reach seawater.

Log-a-Log had jumped to land first. “Dont show yourselves. Stay here close by the boats until I return, he cautioned them. “Bandle, keep a lookout from the top of that dune. The rest of you keep your heads down. The seashore can be a dangerous place sometimes. With that he was gone.

Rosie shrugged and started unpacking breakfast. “Im bally well famished. What ho you lot, whos for nosebags? Whoo ...

Foremoles paw clamped across her mouth, cutting off the strident laugh. “Yurr naow, marm, ee doant wants tbe oopsettin everybeast do ee? Koindly keep from lar-fin thankee.

The shrews lit a smokeless little fire from tinder-dry grass and charcoal. It burned low and red. Breakfast was a simple affair of honey, hot shrewbread, and mint tea.

About halfway through the morning Bundle hopped down from his lookout perch high on the dune crying, “Log-a-Logs back, an hes brought company!

The Redwallers were quite taken aback by the appearance of the shrew Chieftains companion. Log-a-Log introduced the newcomer briefly.

“Meet Finnbarr Galedeep, the sea otter.

One time in the distant past the big malebeast might have been a handsome creature, but the long scars of old battles tracing a course over his muscular form, coupled with a mussel-shell eyepatch and a missing ear, gave him a fearsome look. A curved swordhilt protruded over each of his shoulders, carried in cross-belted sheaths strapped to his back. Grinning good-naturedly at his wide-eyed audience, Finnbarr thrust forth a heavily tattooed limb. “ Eres me flipperits as good as me true eart. The Gale-deeps at yservice!

Introductions were made all around, and food was brought for the

guest. He seated himself on the landward side of the dune, enjoying the mid-morning sun. Winking roguishly at the assemblage, Finnbarr went through pasties, salad, and October ale as though he had survived a seven-season famine. Then, wiping foam and crumbs from his mouth, the sea otter got right down to business.

“Belay, mateys, as I sees it yore wantin tsail far south oer deep seas. Well fer that you needs a good stout ship. Ole Log-a-Logs canoes wouldnt take ye a rough sea league out there on the waves.

Joseph looked the sea otter directly in his good eye. “Are we to take it that you have such a ship, Finnbarr? he asked.

The big fellow laughed uproariously, as if at some private joke, clapping Joseph soundly on the back. “Ho-hoho! Bless yer cockles, mouse. I aint got so much as a waterlogged twig tme name!

Foremole wrinkled his nose in consternation. “Burr, baint no larfen matter, zurr. Ifn youm doant ave a gurt shipper, whurrll usns get one?

“We steals it, o course!

A loud cry rang out from both shrews and Redwallers. “Steal a ship?

“Quiet now and listen to Finnbarrs plan, Log-a-Log silenced them curtly.

The sea otter gestured over his shoulder. “Not arf a days march round yon eadland lays two big searat galleons. The Pearl Queen is the best of the twain; she was my craft once, but thats another story. Now she belongs to a scurvy-backed bilgerat called Capn Slipp. The other vessels the Shalloo; er masters Capn Strapp. Theyre brothers, Slipp n Strapp. Corsairs, dangerous an sly, both of em, always fightin among themselves.

Hon Rosie could contain herself no longer, and she blurted out, “Oh I say, pinchin a ship off some rotten ol? searats, what a super wheeze. Whoohahahahoo!

Finnbarr winced, waggling a paw in his good ear. “A hare, eh. I likes hares, mad an perilous beasts. Tho Id be beholden if yed stow the hootin marm, sound carries round thisaways. Lissen now, the plans simple. We sinks the Shalloo an steals the Pearl Queen an sails off in er. Wot dyer say, mates?

Log-a-Log spoke for them all. “It sounds like a desperate scheme,

Finnbarr, but were with you all the way, every beast!

The sea otter showed glittering white teeth in a swift grin. Whipping out one of his swords, he began outlining a map of his plan in the damp sand of the streambank.

“Hearken now, cullies, eres where the two ships lie at anchor, in the shallows offshore. Both crews will be on the beach tonight, feastin around a fire, so there should be only a few aboard each vessel keepin watch. We wait til the swell of igh water when the tides aturn after midnight, then tis quick n silent. In these ere shrewboats you lot sail seaward, come in on a curve to board Pearl Queen an take er. Meself an Log-a-Logll swim oer tthe Shalloo to bore some oles in er side an scuttle er in the bay. Then its out onto the wide blue briny fer us all!

Joseph studied the plan, nodding solemnly. “I like it; simple and straightforward, thats the best way!

The remainder of that day they spent resting in the shelter of the dunes. Rufe Brush watched the lengthening shadows on the sand, confiding his worries to Durry in hushed whispers.

“Ive never stolen anything before. Well, I suppose I filched a few candied chestnuts when I was a Dibbun, but never something as big as a ship!

Durry Quill, an adventurer born, winked at Rufe. “Dont you fret yoreself, mate. Well stick tgether. Hah! Searats sat all great big cowards. Just show em a weapon an growl, like this: Grr! That settles em!

Rufe picked up the rapier given to him by one of the Guosim. Waving it halfheartedly, he tried a timid growl. “Grr. How does that sound, Durry?

“GarrooohaharroogumTr! The twin blades of Finnbarr Galedeeps curved swords flashed in front of Rufes startled eyes. Then, swiftly sheathing both blades, the big sea otter ruffled the young squirrels ears playfully.

“Do it like that, matey. Show em ymean business an dont be arf carted about it. Youll do all right.

Darkness fell as they made a final cold meal of oat scones, cheese, and ciderno fires were allowed to pinpoint their position in the dunes at the shore edge. Sentries were posted while the rest lay trying to steal a

quick nap, each with their thoughts of what awaited them where the two ships lay at anchor around the headland. Would it be a swift victory and a good ship, or a wrong plan ending in capture and death, or slavery at the cruel claws of sea-rats? A three-quarter moon shimmered over the restless sea in the soft summerdark as the time drew closer to midnight.

Dawn had already broken over Southsward when Furpp called two of his grandchildren to assist him.

“Yurr, Burdill, you an Grumbee stir ee stumps. Usns must take ee brekkist to our friends.

Burdill shook his velvety head. “Hurr, granfer, theym aready be gonned. Miz Mariel, shem roused tothers long since. Me an Grumbee packed em a brekkist to eat on ee way.

Furpp inspected his digging claws closely, in the way that some older moles will do when deep in thought. He nodded decisively, then patted the two small moles. “Gudd gudd. Ee did woisely, both o youm hinfants. Hurr, tho oi wanders whurr they be agone to?

“Oi did ear ee gurt rabbet Meldn say as they wurr eckertoimerin, Grumbee piped up.

Furpp blinked down at the youngster. “Eckertoimerin? Hoo an, that sounds noice, tho oi be wunderin wot ee means, eckertoimerin.

Had the moles been able to pronounce the word properly they would have known that Mariel, Dandin, and Bowly had gone out on a reconnoitering trip with Meld-rum and his leveret squad. Meldrum the Magnificent was familiar with the terrain, he explained as they strode south over the hills.

“Best route to Florets this way. See a stream ahead soon, take that route, might meet some otters, wot? Useful coves, otters; may get some info from them about this confounded Foxwolf thingee. Reconnoiter an gather information, thats what I always say, eh?

Mariel, whose idea it had been in the first place, nodded agreement as they crested the brow of an immense sandhill. On an impulse she spread her paws, stopping them from continuing further. “Hold it. Did you feel the ground a bit shaky then? I did.

Bowly crept under her outstretched paws, then after venturing a bit further on the hilltop, he tippawed gingerly back. “Yore right. Its like

a great overangin sandcliff were stannin on. Best move back afore it collapses!

Meldrum waggled his ears and sniffed. “Dont remember it bein like that before. Bit of a while since Ive been in this neck o the woods, doncha know. Not an uncommon occurrence, thougherosion I think they call it. Side of the jolly ol sandhill slips away one day an leaves the grassy top like a big overhang. No matter. Well go another way.

They slid down the undamaged side of the hill and climbed to the top of another, safer, one. Dandin was first up, and he shot out a paw. “Look, theres the stream. Somethings happening down therelooks like trouble!

Mariel and Meldrum joined him. The hilltop commanded a good view of the scene taking place some distance off downstream. Two creatures, a squirrel and her young one, clung to the broad surface of a tree trunk which was being propelled by a band of otters. Closing rapidly on them was a band of rats, headed by two ermine and Nagru. The Field Marshal hare peered down, recognizing the adult squirrel.

“Great seasons, its Queen Serena. Looks like she needs helpform into skirmish line, troop!

Mariel placed herself squarely in front of the impulsive hare, halting any further activity. Her mind raced madly as she tried reasoning with him. “Field Marshal, sir, remember what you saidplan first, act later!

“No time now, missie. Duty calls, yknow. Stand aside! said Meldrum, as he adjusted the stone at the end of his rod.

Dandin joined Mariel. “Sir, therere far too many of them for our small force to go up against. If you charge in now, well all be killed. Your four young nephews, Bowly, do you want to see them massacred by hundreds of vermin? Thered be no point to it!

While Dandin was reasoning with Meldrum, a solution had formed swiftly in the mousemaids agile mind. It was risky, but worth a try. She interrupted Dan dins pleas.

“Listen, Ive just thought of a plan! Runtwold, Colt-vine, well need your slings and stone pouches. Bowly, take these four young hares back to Furpps dwelling. Tell him to watch out for those creatures on the stream and shelter them. Go!

Mariels voice had such a ring of certainty to it that Bowly and the

hares were gone in a flash. As she and Dandin armed themselves with slings and stones, she turned to the slightly bemused Meldrum. “Now, we need a beast of some weight and courage. Are you game for this, sir?

Meldrum the Magnificent was caught up by MarieFs urgency and sureness. His ears stood straight as he said, “Game? Hah, say on mgel, theres none gamer than this hare!

Mariel knotted the Gullwhacker securely about her waist. “Good! Now heres what well do ...

Queen Serena hugged little Truffen to her. He was weeping piteously, frightened by the sight and sounds of the horde led by the Dirgecallers and Nagru. They were in plain sight now, pouring along the streambank after the floating log. While the rest of the otters pushed the tree trunk through the water, Iris and Greenbeck, armed with javelins, climbed onto the log. Protecting the squirrels with their bodies, the two brave otters prepared to face the onslaught together.

Howling with triumph, the Foxwolf halted his horde on the streambank. The two ermine snuffled and wailed hideously. Eager to get at their prey but reluctant to venture into the deep stream, they wove back and forth at the waters edge. The otters had steered the log over to the far bank to distance themselves from attack. Some of the horderats were beginning to string their bows up and select arrows. Nagru turned on them with a snarl.

“Put those bows away. Arrows would spoil the sport. Ive got them now and I want them alive and unharmed. My Dirgecallers can have the otters, but I want those two squirrels alive. Stand ready and await my orders!

Without warning the rat called Mingol shrieked as, grabbing his head in both paws, he fell senseless to the ground. His partner Vengro stared down in puzzlement at him.

“Whats wrong with Mingol? He was just ... Unhh! Vengro slumped beside his companion. Nagru whirled about to see what the trouble was, and a slingstone thudded hard into his back. One of the Dirgecallers yowled in anguish as another stone slammed into its ribs.

“Get down. Were being attacked! the rat Captain Riveneye yelled.

More stones followed in quick succession, and a mocking laugh rang out from some bushes a short distance away.

“Hahaha! Keep those heads down, scum. Theres a whole army of slingers ready to pick you off!

The wolfhide had taken most of the impact of the stone that struck Nagru. He scrambled forward on all fours, peering into the bushes. Seeing he was not immediately hit, the Foxwolf ventured upright, ducking swiftly as a good-sized pebble lodged between the wolfskull and his brow. Grimacing with pain, he plucked it out and hurled it back at the bush. A short yelp was followed by the sight of two mice retreating to the deep cover of thicker foliage. Nagru grabbed stones from the ground, throwing them at the place where the mice had hidden as he ran forward calling, “Theres only two of em, its no army. Charge!

Dandin nudged Mariel urgently. “The games uptime we werent here!

They broke cover and began a mad dash, back the way .they had come. Mariel risked a quick glance backward. “Better shiftthe whole packs after us! she yelled.

Footpaws thrumming madly against the card), Mariel and Dandin ran for their lives, the breath rising ragged in their throats as the two Dirgecallers, heading the pack, sped on their tails, gaining by the moment. Nagru followed in the rear, hurling challenges and threats. “Tear them to bits! Stop and fight, mice! Dandin stumbled. Mariel, catching his paw quickly, pulled him upright and they dashed on together, side by side, dust and sand flying, hearts pounding wildly, with the Dirgecallers, slightly ahead of the horde, closing fast. Muriels head came up; she glimpsed the big eroded dune ahead, rearing up like a mighty wave of sand, the grassy crest projecting perilously over a huge inward-curving hill. Through her blurred vision she could barely make out the ponderous form of Meldrum perched far out on the grassy top. Putting on a final spurt she tugged Dandin along. “Not far ... Come on ... just a bit more!

Meldrum the Magnificent watched the tableau below, gritting his teeth with suspense. It looked as if the two mice would surely be stopped by the ermine before they made the slope. No! They had put on an extra spurt and pulled away a bit; now they were on the final stretch and, calling up stamina from some deep reserve, they actually broke into a headlong sprint. As Meldrum stamped his footpaw down with delight, the whole dunetop shuddered. He went still immediately, saving his move until the exact moment. Leaning out, he squinted downwardthere they were! Mariel and Dandin had made it to the hill. Sand flew from beneath their paws as they battled upward

into the curve with the ermine and about ten front-runners of the horde beginning to close on them again. The two mice suddenly changed course, veering sideways to the right where the curve of the hill straightened, and Mariel shouted one word at the top of her voice.

“Now!!!

Meldrum instinctively knew the pursuers were climbing the hill directly beneath him, but Mariels voice confirmed it. The old hare jumped as high as he could into the air.

Whump!

The whole dunetop shook. He jumped again, harder.

Whump!

The earth trembled as he landed, grass roots tearing as they parted company with the sand. Gritting his teeth, Meldrum the Magnificent leaped high in the air a third time, yelling out the battle cry of hares and badgers.

“Eulaliaaaa!

Whooooosssshhh! Whooomph!

The entire top curve of the high dune fell with an almighty avalanche of weeds, grass, and sand. It seemed to hover in midair a fraction, then down it came like a thunderbolt, with the old warrior perched atop still yelling his war cry. The Dirgecallers and at least a score of the rat horde never knew what happened to them. Countless tons of sand wiped them out instantly.

Nagru came dashing up, pushing and kicking his way through the awestruck masses. He made his way to the front and gaped in amazement at the scene. Mariel and Dandin had escaped the worst, but they were trapped, buried almost to their necks in sand. Meldrum had fared little better; being immersed to his ample waist, he could only struggle helplessly and hurl insults at his enemy.

“Good wheeze, eh? Wished we couldve got the crummy lot of you under there with your stinkin rotten ermine and some of your other pals. Well, whatre ygaw-pin at?

The Foxwolf glared at the bold veteran. “My Dirge-callers, you killed them!

Mariel spat sand from her mouth and yelled defiantly. “Aye, dig me out of here and Ill give you a run for your acorns, too, you great two-headed, slop-mouthed, ring-tailed excuse for a toad!

Dandin joined in hurling imprecations. “Now then, scabby skin, just imagine if we had been an army? Hah! You and those other gray slime wouldnt be around to tell the story. Dig us loose, and youll find out that were not a couple of helpless squirrels!

Nagru controlled his rage. “Oh, well dig you out all right, but after a good spell of starvation in my dungeons youll find yourselves dangling by your footpaws as target practice for my archers. Then youll wish you had been a couple of squirrels. Wetchops! Go and get those squirrels. Take fifty archers and finish those otters off, then bring the Queen and her brat to me. The rest of you, dig those three out and bind them tight!

The three companions were dug out and tightly pinioned with ropes, though they continued their verbal abuse of Nagru and his horde.

“Hey, lily liver, tie my paws tighter, because if I get them around your filthy neck Ill throttle you!

“Zounds! Takes six of yeh to truss me up, eh? So it should, you frog-swampin, mud-scoffin, fly wallopers!

They were lugged down the hill and bound to carrying poles. All three lay in the sand as Nagru circled them, aiming the odd kick at their prostrate forms as he spoke.

“Youll wish youd never crossed trails with the Urgan Nagru when Im done with you. Two bold little mice, eh. Maybe well give you to the cooks after my archers have finished with your carcasses. Hmm, and a big fat hare. Ive never tasted hare. What dyou say, hare, will you be tasty enough to be served at a conquerors banquet?

Meldrum sniffed in disgust. “If its the last flippin thing I do, Ill stick in your rotten throat an choke you. Blaggard!

Wetchops came dashing back yelling, “Theyve gone! Theres not a sight nor sound of otters or squirrels anywhere! Theyve vanished into thin air!

Mariel winked cheekily at the Foxwolf. “Bit of good news, eh? How dyou feel about that, lumpbrain?

Nagru kicked the mousemaid savagely. “Not half as bad as youre going to feel, mousemaid!

# 10

Sighing restlessly, the boundless sea broke large rollers into white cream which hissed hungrily up to the tideline. A sea breeze, with no clouds to chase around the moonlit vault of the skies, spun dry sand into dancing spirals. Midnight laid its cloak over the Mossflower coast. The four logboats, propelled on muffled paddles by Log-a-Logs Guosim shrews, slid silently out over the remainder of the stream that stretched across the shore from dune to sea.

Finnbarr Galedeep and Log-a-Log sat in the prow of the leading vessel. Between them lay a mallet and a broken sword which would serve well as hammer and chisel. Hon Rosie and Joseph perched in the stern, both armed with strong throwing slings and satchels of sturdy pebbles. The female hare wriggled her ears delightedly, scarcely able to contain her excitement.

“I say, what a jape! Whoo ... Umff!

Joseph clamped strong paws about Rosies mouth, his voice stern and low. “Not one single giggle, dyou hear me, Rosie Woodsorrel?

Rufe, Durry, and Foremole wielded paddles in the second boat, the mole muttering darkly to himself, “OS doant moinds liddle boaters an streamwater, but those gurt shippers as sails on waves, boo hurr, no zurr!

Rufe mispaddled and splashed himself. “Wish I was back in Red wall. He sighed. “Id kiss the grass an never have aught to do with water again, not even to wash!

Durry Quill smiled across at the timid squirrel. “Acorns! By the end o this voyage youll be as big an old seadog as ever stood afore a mainmast. Keep yore tail up, Rufe, an dip that paddle deep.

The prows of all four boats bucked as they struck the first waves from the sea. Finnbarr turned to the crew sitting abaft of him, his single eye shining wildly, and shouted, “Now dig those paddles strong n deep, cullieswere on blue water!

Capn Slipp of the Pearl Queen sat alone on the shore beyond the headland toasting whelks over an open fire. He had been arguing with his brother, Capn Strapp, again. Though Slipp was the larger and stronger of the two searats, he did not possess Strapps eloquent

tongue. Tonight they had argued over whether to sail north or south. Slipp wanted to sail north, but Strapp painted such a glowing picture of southern sun and easy pickings that both crews sided with him. They had all gone aboard his ship, the Shatloo, to celebrate, leaving Slipp alone to sulk over a small fire on the shore. Slipp was not worried; tomorrow he would continue the argument, escalating it into a fight, and he could always beat his brother hollow in a hard scrap. Then he would humiliate Strapp and rein gain command. Perhaps he might even imprison him aboard the Pearl Queen and have Rappsnout, his first mate, take over as Captain of the Shalloo. Slipp smiled to himself. Yes, that would teach Strapp to keep his high-flown opinions to himself.

Log-a-Log looked worried. He knew something was wrong with the plan as soon as he spotted the tiny fire on the shore, then his view was obscured as the hulks of the two ships loomed large in the dark.

“Finnbarr, did you see? Theres hardly anybeast on shore.

The sea otter thumped the prow with his paw. “Barnacles n bilgewater! I shoulda knowed twouldnt be all plain sailin. Hark though, mate, they must be all aboard the Shalloo. See the lights shinin from er ports an lissen to that racket. Theyre avin some sort o feast below decks. All the better for us, they wont ear the mallet.

Log-a-Log stared at him incredulously. “Youre not still thinking of scuttling the Shattool

Finnbarr was already slipping over the side into the inky seawater. “Course I am, messmate! I aint leavin no searat ship afloat to come chasin after us. Pass me those tools, he said as he stretched out a paw. , With a grunt of resignation, Log-a-Log grabbed the implements and dived over the side into the sea. He bobbed up beside Finnbarr and passed him the heavy mallet.

“Youre right, of course. Lets get it done!

As they swam off, the four boats hoved to on the seaward side of the Pearl Queen. Joseph seized hold of a rope that trailed down from the deck high above. “Come on, lets steal ourselves a ship!

Blaggut, boatswain of the Pearl Queen, was lying half asleep beside the mainmast, consoling himself with a flagon of seaweed grog. There were only himself and six crew left aboard while the others feasted and roistered aboard the Shalloo. Still, a ship had to have a watch, and at least the bad-tempered Capn Slipp was ashore. He took a pull

at the flagon. Wiping a grubby paw across his lips, he blinked twicewas that a mouse and a big rabbit just come aboard? Blaggut staggered upright. “Ahoy, you two, whatn the name of fishes are ye do ...

Thunk!

Rosies slingstone collided with his jaw, sending him staggering backward. Tripping over the coaming, he fell into the hold with a loud bang. As the rest of the watch came pouring out onto the deck, disturbed by the shouting and the noise, Joseph shrugged. “Good shot, Rosie. Pity you never dropped him where he sat.

Hon Rosie fitted another stone to her sling. “Sat? The blighter was standing. Look out!

Joseph swung his loaded sling without letting its stone go and caught a second rat neatly across the skull, dropping him like a log. Then the shrews swarmed aboard, rapiers clenched in their teeth, followed by Durry, Rufe, and Foremole, Durry went down with a piercing yell as the flat of a searat cutlass smacked him across the back of his head. The rat stood over him, raising his weapon, about to strike when Rufe Brush came whistling through the air on a sail rope and booted him overboard. Rufe swung back and forth doing what the sea otter had told him to dogrowl.

“Garrroooaaarrreeeaaarrrrgghh!

As he careered to and fro, Rufes bottom accidentally bumped another searat, who was perched on the ships rail, ready to dive on Foremole. The rat was knocked overboard into the sea. Still growling in his most ferocious manner, Rufe slipped from the rope, rendering another rat senseless as he landed with a bump on the unfortunate creatures head. Throwing valor to the winds, the remaining two searats took one glance at the invaders and hurled themselves overboard.

Joseph sprang to the foredeck, gazing anxiously across the dark waters at the vessel Shalloo. Hon Rosie joined him.

“Hi ho and away we go on our very own stolen ship! Come on, Joseph, you old stick-in-the-mud, whats up?

The Bellmaker nodded toward the Shalloo. “Look, our noise must have roused the searats. The ships swarming with em. Finnbarr and Log-a-Log are in trouble!

Through the darkness the two creatures could barely be seen, swimming toward the Pearl Queen as searats hurled spears, arrows, and slingstones at them. Joseph began shouting orders.

“Get some ropes. Throw them out to Finnbarr and Log-a-Log as soon as they get close enough! Archers, slingers, give those searats something to think about. Keep their heads down so they cant get our friends in the water! The rest of you, make ready to sail, stand by to slip anchor, get up in the rigging, and loose the sails. Hurry!

As the arrows and stones whined out over the sea, Rufe found himself scrambling up the rigging alongside Durry. They slashed at the ties holding the sails furled, both roaring. “Groooaaarrgharrr!

A slingstone bounced off Log-a-Logs head, stunning him. He was going down, his mouth and nostrils filling with seawater. Finnbau dived and came up under him and, with the shrew lying across his back, the big sea otter struck out valiantly for the Pearl Queen.

“I say, Finn old lad, catch this! Hon Rosie was her usual accurate self. She slung the rope, landing it neatly a pawsbreadth from Finnbarr. The otter latched on to it with powerful jaws. Next moment he was streaking through the waters like a great minnow, as Rosie and several others heaved the line in paw over paw.

“Whoohahahahoo! Up you come, you two. Great seasons, look at the bump on old Log-a-things bonce. Righto, Ive got him! The sails were billowing, blown out taut by the wind. Pearl Queen strained against the anchor rope like a wild animal waiting to be unleashed. Joseph, aided by Finnbarr Galedeep, heaved against the tiller, forcing the rudder around until Pearl Queen was bowsprit out, facing the horizon. The tide swell was lifting at its peak when the sea otter bellowed, “Cut loose your anchor cable!

Foremole had found a ships axe, perfectly suited to the job. He struck the rope twice where it came through the forard port. Whack! Thwack!

Pearl Queen ran free, veering southwest into the heaving seas.

Capn Slipp was waist deep in the water, about to take the plunge and swim toward his ship, when he saw it buck from the anchor cable and begin heading out to sea. With a howl of dismay he hurtled forward into the waves and struck out for his brothers ship. Dizzy from roistering in the close confines of a hot and well-lit cabin, Capn Strapp shivered on deck, rubbed his eyes, and peered into the darkness,

demanding, “Whatn the name o burstin bilges is goin on?

Rappsnout, mate of the Pearl Queen, explained as best be could. “That bangin amidships, Capn, it was two hanimals, otter an a shrew I fink. They musta been tryin : to bore an ole in yer vessel, I reckon.

Strapp peered anxiously over the side. “An did they? be asked.

“Bless yer cockles, no, Capn. We chased em off, Rappsnout said brandishing his cutlass. “But they swim-med oer to yer brothers craft; looks like themn their mates ave took off with it.

“Avast the Shalloo. Throw me a line! Strapps eyes were now accustomed to the night. He saw his brother swimming toward the Shalloo, and shouted, “Rappsnout, throw Capn Slipp a line. The dutiful mate grabbed a heaving line and hurled one end of it out to the figure in the water. Strapp chuckled wickedly. “Now throw him the other end of it! Rappsnout blinked and scratched his head in bewilderment. “Frow im the other end, Capn. Are you sure? Strapp was already shouting orders to the two crews he had aboard. “Hoist yer anchor! Bring er about souwest. Unfurl all sail smart like! Nip to it! He turned to Rappsnout. “Sure? Course Im sure, mate. Thats if yer want to be Capn of the Shalloo. When weve captured the Pearl Queen, Ill be master of er. Ive alhis wanted that vessel for meself. Nows the penance!

A slow smile spread over Rappsnouts dull features.

“Ho, I see! Yer a sly un, Capn. But wot about yore brother?

Strapp felt the ship shudder as the anchor was hauled free of the water; he watched the sails billow out into the wind. “My brother, that stinkin bully! Capn of the seashore, thats wot e can be ifn e makes it back to land. Throw im the other end of the line, Capn Rappsnout!

Proud of his new appointment, the former mate tossed the line to Slipp, sticking his snout in the air, and ignoring the swimmers cries, in a dignified manner as befits a Captain. Slipp floundered in the creamy wake of the Shal-loo, swallowing seawater as he watched the stern recede southwest.

“Strapp, ye double-dyed villain, come back! Rappsnout, stop im, matey! Ill ave yore liver n lights fer this, dyou ear me! Ill saw off yer tail an ang yer by it, you scum! Treading water and still grasping both ends of the useless line, the infuriated pirate shouted threats and insults until the Shalloo grew small in the distance.

Foremole thumped Log-a-Logs back as he spat out sea-water, holding a wet cloth to the swollen lump between his ears.

“Thurr, youm taken et easy naow, zurr Log. Wem all safe!

Finnbarr had relinquished the tiller to Durry and Rufe, while Joseph went below to check the ships supplies and weaponry. The sea otter nicked Log-a-Log in a blanket. “There now, shipmate. Pity we never ad a chance to sink the Shalloo, but never mind. We got us the Pearl Queen. Our lads did a good job takin over. I ear young Rufe accounted fer four searats single-pawed. Haharr, we got us a prime crew, no mistake!

Rufe and Durry clung bravely to the tiller, holding the ship on course until further orders. They grinned fear-somely at one another and growled like old seadogs.

“Gooarrarrarrurrgggg!

Rosie found an unopened flagon at the foot of the mast, uncorked it, and took a long pull.

“Pthoowah!

It sprayed out over several shrews. Rosie held the flagon at paws length, her face crinkled in disgust. “Whoa, corks, I say, is this the stuff they call bilgewa-ter?

Joseph was passing by. He took the flagon and sniffed it. “No, marm, this is the famous seaweed grog. Itll come in very useful for lighting the galley fires. Now I can get a decent supper cooked.

Wiping her mouth on a kerchief, Hon Rosie muttered, “Thats about all the blinkin stuff is any good for!

The ship was well stocked and in excellent repair. Joseph discovered a good cache of cutlasses, knives, spears, and archery equipment in her arms locker. A hot meal of biscuits and shrimp soup was dished out to the crew; they relieved each other in turns so they could all eat. Finnbarr Sat under a stern awning with Joseph and Log-a-Log. The shrew was curious to know what course they were taking. Finnbarr licked a paw and tested the wind saying, “Were runnin southwest as I ordered, mate.

Joseph watched the first streaks of dawn over to the cast. “Southwest? I thought we were supposed to be “heading south. The sea otter drank

soup from the bowl, smacking his lips. “So we will, Bellmaker. Take my affydavit for it, mate, well be runnin due south the moment we strike Roaringburn.

Joseph and Log-a-Log repeated the name simultaneously. “Roaringburn?

“Aye, Roaringburn. Finnbarr chuckled as he stretched out to take a nap. “Its a currentnarrow, deep an very swift, only ever runs one way, south. Mind, itll take some findin, but the moment we hit it, well shift like the wind!

The shrew Bandle poked his head around the awning. “Then wed best find it quick; the Shalloos hard on our paws an bearin down on us fast!

They dashed out from under the cover and, sure enough, there was the Shalloo with every scrap of canvas piled on, double crewed and coming after them like a hungry, windblown hawk.

Dawn also found Capn SHpp wandering the shoreline in a daze, completely unsure of how he had ever gotten back to land. Stumbling back to his position of the previous night, he found the ashes of his fire. He crouched in the wind-tossed sand and blew on a glowing ember, adding sticks and dry grass to it until a small fire flickered. Miserably he perched by it, drying off and waiting for the sun to get up. Cursing and muttering the most dreadful oaths to himself, he scanned the stretch of beach left by the ebbing waves of the outgoing tide. The corpses of six drowned crewrats who had been his ships watch lay still, washed up with the jetsam of the previous nights encounter.

Shivering and damp, Slipp stood up, turning his back to warm it by the fire. Then he saw it.

Blaggut, boatswain of the Pearl Queen, was seated in a shrewboat paddling into shore. Slipp leaped up and down, waving to attract the others attention.

“Ahoy there, Blaggut! Matey, its me, yer good ole Capn!

Blaggut heard and acknowledged with a wave of his paddle. Leaping out into the shallows, he dragged the boat ashore and beached it, smiling and waving joyfully. “Capn, Capn Slipp, matey,tis yerself!

Laughing happily he ran toward Slipp, paws outstretched. “Ho, Capn,

ydont know ow god it does me eart tsee yore face, an a fire too! Theres a stroke o luck. Im froze to the marrow an starvin.

When they met, instead of embracing his boatswain, Slipp leapt upon him and began punching and kicking him. “Boatswain, eh? Had of the watch? Keepin me vessel safe from invaders, was you! You ... you ... useless, gutless, brainless, spineless jellyfish!

Blaggut pranced about on the sand trying to avoid Slipp, who punctuated each word with a hard kick to the boatswains rear.

“Leave a ship with you, lardbottom! I wouldnt leave you in charge of a tadpoles tail! Ill wager you was full o grog an snorin when those ship robbers came aboard! Brainless, bumblin, bulb-nosed buffoon! Slipp had Blaggut tight by the ear and his seaboot squelched every time he booted the boatswains bottom. Blaggut howled.

“Owowowow, Capn! Mercy, spare me! There was undreds of em. I was wide awake an at me post, I swear it. Ouchooch! They ganged up on me! Ow, stoppit please! I fought like a madbeast! Aagh that urts! But they overwhelmed me. Honest, ouch! I remembers shoutin, “Elp, Im bein whelmed over!

Slipp flung the blubbering boatswain facedown in the sand. “Whats that thing yore paddlin about in, dogs-bottom?

Blaggut kept alternately covering his head and his rear with both paws, in case the Captain felt like kicking again. “Its a sorta liddle boat, Capn. I was paddlin up an down searchin for youcross me eart I was. I found a big stream back yonder with fresh drinkin water, nicensweet tis. Dyou want me to show it ye? You can drink yore fill!

Slipp drew his cutlass and whacked the boatswains back, hard. “Up on yore paws, bubblebrains. Take me to it.

Blaggut paddled the tide line with Slipp lying back in the boat, giving him the occasional cutlass prod. “Cmon, put yore back into it! Wheres this stream, or does it just run through yore empty ead?

Blaggut paddled harder. “Yowch! There it is up ahead, Capn. See the sun glintin on it? Good n sweet, just like I said.

The morning sun warmed Slipps back as he bent and lapped streamwater. Blaggut brightened up.

“Youll like it ere, Capn. Theres dunes an probly fruit growin nearby. I

can fish for us, an well live ere snug as two bugs in a rug. Ill ... Yaagh! Slipp gave the boatswain a smack that sent him sprawling into the stream.

“Froghead! Get in that boat an start paddlin upstream. It must lead somewheres, maybe theres good pickins up there. Come on, bulgebelly, stir yer stumps. By noon Blaggut had paddled the shrewboat into the fringes of Mossflower Wood.

# 11

Dandin was first to regain his senses. He wished fervently : that he had nothis entire body was a mass of pain. The last thing he recalled was the three of them being dragged along the ground all the way to Castle Floret. Kicked, buffeted, bumped, and scratched, until they lost consciousness. Somewhere in the background he heard voices.

“Sourgall, look, one of ems comin around.

“Cmon Fillch, wed better go an report back.

As the voices died away in the distance, Dandin sat up, trying to ignore his discomfort. One of his eyes was swollen shut; through the other he took stock of his surroundings, Mariel and Meldrum lay on either side of him, still senseless. All of their footpaws had been bound together by a thick rope. They were in a prison cell, its floor strewn th dry rushes and old straw. Four stout stone walls sur-inded them; there was one high, barred window and a wily timbered door, with iron studding and a small yhole grille. Sunlight flooded in from the wide-barred window, lighting up the grimness of their dungeon.

Mariel stirred, her voice a hoarse croak. “Water!

Dandin winced as, cradling her head on his lap, he scoured the cell with his one good eye. “Sorry, theres not a drop in the place. Are you all right?

“Im thirsty-thats how I know Im still alive. Howre you?

“Still here, I suppose. Meldrum looks very still.

The old hare lay prostrate with both eyes shut. He began muttering half to himself. “Want a full military burial, lots of fuss1 medals, sad music, an tears, thatll do. Hmm, at the foot of a good oak tree, nice an shady. They can carve somethin fittin on it, too. Now, me effects, let me see. I leave a nice mess jacket to Thurdale, hope he wears it with pride. About me rod V line, young Foghill gets that, blighters always had his eye on it anyway ... The Field Marshals finely attuned ears waggled. “Theres somebeast comin. Steady in the ranks than. Lie doggo, make em think were still out.

Locks squealed and bolts clanked as they were withdrawn, and the door creaked open. Nagru and Silvamord swept in, flanked by a dozen

rats. One of them stirred Meldrum with his footpaw.

“This is the beast who slew Captain Bragglin. We had the two mice cornered when he butted in. There were four, no, five othersfour young hares and a hedgepig.

Nagru shoved the rat aside contemptuously saying, “And they vanquished a full patrol of you!

“You should talk, said Silvamord, her voice heavy with scorn. “These three between them slew your wonderful Dirgecallers and more than a score of hordebeasts. Tell us about that again!

The Foxwolf ignored her, but took his spite out by kicking Mariel. “I thought you said they were coming around, Sourgall. This ones still senseless. Look!

He kicked Mariel again, and her eyes snapped open. “Ill remember your face when the time comes for me to slay you, ugly one! she spat out.

Nagru stood over her, smiling evilly. “Well, well, tough words for a mousemaid whos hardly in a position to slay anybeast. Listen, fool, I am the Organ Nagru. I could squash all three of you like so many bothersome gnats, and I will if you dont answer my questions. What are you doing in Southsward? Where did the squirrels and otters go to? Tell me!

From his position on the cell floor, Meldrum the Magnificent blew a long sigh of boredom. “Somebeasts love thear the sound of their own voice, dont they? Tell that wallah to buzz off, will you? Im takin me noon nap!

Silvamord drew a dagger and leaped at the hare. Nagru restrained her as she snapped at him, “Dolt! Cant you see theyre not going to tell you anything? Kill them now, I say!

Nagru placed himself between Silvamord and the cap-tives. “I want them kept alive for the moment. Leave this tome.

The three friends sat up facing Nagru, conscious of the Vixen prowling back and forth behind him. The Foxwolf crouched, letting his metal claws show ominously. v “Youd do well to listen to my words. Make it a lot rjtasier on yourselves and just tell me where Serena and lfaat brat of hers are hiding.

Dandin eyed him coolly. “Or?

Silvamord leaned over Nagrus shoulder, brandishing her dagger lovingly as she hissed, “Or you wont be able to talk for screaming!

The Foxwolf shook his head pityingly. “Shell get to you sooner or later, probably after youve rotted in here awhile from hunger and thirst. So give me your answer now, and well reach an agreement. I could do with three warriors such as you; it would spare you all this.

The trio looked from one to another. Mariel nodded. They lay back down, with Meldrum yawning. “Close the door on your way out, will you? It gets quite drafty in here with it open.

Surprisingly Nagru kept his temper, though he had to signal the guards to restrain Silvamord. She was struggling to get at them, spittle and foam ringing her lips as she shouted wildly, “Leave me an hour with them, just an hour. Ill have them talking so fast they wont be able to stop! The guards hustled her out. Nagru stood framed in the doorway, a thin smile on his lips.

“Fine words from warriors, but think on this: You are no longer warriors free to do battle. You are my prisoners, to do with as I please. Without liberty, food, or drink. Soon you will begin to feel weak; thin and hungry, sick and thirsty. I have seen it before. You will be reduced to whining, cringing wretches who will betray one another for a cup of water or a crust of bread.

Meldrum raised his head, careful not to show how painful the effort was. “Hard luck, laddie. Fear wont work on us. Weve faced death too many times taking felons like yself down a peg or two. Ysee, theres a world of difference twixt warriors n windbags, between real fighters an jumped-up johnnies who go around wearin the skins of other creaturesbad form, yknow! Quick as ylike now, toddle off an close the door quietly!

The cell door slammed shut with an earsplitting bang. Nagru shouted through the spyhole as he left, “Bravado wont feed you, and stupidity will kill you!

In the silence that followed, Mariel untied the rope that bound their footpaws together. Standing up carefully, she gave an agonized groan. “Ooahh! That villains right, you know. Were hardly in a fit state to stand on our own paws, let alone defy him.

Supporting one another, they staggered over to the window. It was not

as high as it had first looked. They scrambled up onto the broad sill and Mariel pulled herself forward, craning her neck to peer between the bars.

“Oh, my giddy paws! It feels like sitting in the clouds looking down from here. Its a sheer drop down to the Valley. The trees look like tiny blobs of green moss!

Meldrum crawled over to join her. “Right, mdear. Were at the rear of Castle Floret, straight drop, no moat around this side, no need for one ysee. If Im not mistaken, were on the third floor, north wing. Nice view across the valley, wot? Pity we aint got nothin tdo but sit here an admire it.

Dandin took a look and then sat back, resting against sun-warmed stone. “Dont you wish you were a bird?

The garrulous old campaigner flexed a stiffened paw. “Wish I were any flippin thing but a three-quarters dead at the moment, young feller. Deed I do! Mariel felt her back, raw through the holes that had been made in her tunic with being dragged along. “Imprisoned, hungry, thirsty. Theres only one way us to go now, up!

“Were already up, old gel. How much further up would you like us tbe, eh? said Meldrum, probing gingerly at a loose tooth. “Listen to a veteran, you two. Best thing to do in a case like this is sleep. Calms the nerves, clears the brain, an helps nature heal the body, wot? Bit of shut-eye, thats the ticket!

He received no arguments on that score, and within moments the three of them were dozing on the broad win-dowsill in the noontide sun. Deep sleep overtook the trio of battered warriors immediately.

A search party scoured the collapsed sand dune, sifting through the sand. Furpp straightened up, unable to find anything. He shook his head at Bowly, saying, “Youm sure theym been round boi yurr, maister?

Iris waved a paw at the upset state of the wrecked sandhill. “They must have been. Look at all the activity thats taken place round hereprints, tracks, holes. Id say some sort of fight took place. Whoops, careful there! The female otter had been standing on one end of Meldrums rod, and she toppled backward downhill as Coltvine unearthed the other end vigorously. He gave a whoop.

“What ho! Lookie here, Uncle Mels fishin weapon!

“Aha! The GullwhackerI was right! said Bowly as he tugged Mariels rope from the sand.

Greenbeck shook his head in admiration as he unearthed the paw of a dead horderat. Letting it go limp, he kicked sand back over it. “Sink me, wot a tussle they mustve put up!

“Aye, just like Muta an my Rab, brave creatures! Iris said as she blinked back a tear.

Furpp patted her with his huge digging claws. “Roight, marm. They uns gived us toim to rescue ee Queen an ee babby. Leastways theym safe naow.

Greenbeck sat down between them, keeping his voice low and out of earshot of Bowly and the leverets. “Furpp, get yore moles to dig round ere, he said. “If they aint buried under this lot then theyve been taken by the Fox-wolf an that orde.

“Fate and seasons have mercy on the poor brave beasts. Iris shuddered. “If theyre in the cells at Floret no creatures can help them, even supposing that they are still alive!

# 12

“Up in the riggin, out on those yardarms, crew!

Finnbarr Galedeep fought with the tiller to keep the Pearl Queen plowing southwest as he roared orders.

“Pile on every scrap o sail, buckoes! Log-a-Log, search the lockers, we need more canvas! Joseph, lash that boom on the same course were runnin, souwest an keel down! Ill show the scurvy flotsam, with me own paw on me own tiller theres not even the seagulls kin outsail the ole Pearl QueenV

Out on the yards, lashing down sheets like two old salts, Durry and Rufe roared into the blasting winds, while at the same time comforting a thoroughly seasick Fore-mole.

“Foremole, forget that your stomachs heavin. Just roar like we do. Youll feel better right away, promise!

The good mole tried, but he was not convinced, roaring fitfully as he glanced backward to the Shattoo. “Hooour-rrarrruurrg! Oi wishes oi wurr back ome, stead o bein chased by a gurt boatload o vurmints. Hooarrurg!

Strapp was perched high on the prow of Shalloo, clinging to the wet lines as the bow dipped and heaved. He howled encouragement at his double crew.

“Bend yer louse-ridden backs, cullies. I said wed be sailin south, didnt I? Keep yore glims on the prize ahead, the Pearl Queen, me new ship! If I cant catch er wid two crews to speed us on, nobeast can!

Rappsnout joined him, shouting to be heard above the shrieking gale and hissing spray. “Dont fret yer eart, Capn. They got a few lengths start on us, but well overhaul er soon!

“Yer right there, mate, Strapp said as he wiped bow-spray from his eyes. “Get some archers up ere, an some grapplin ooks. When we gets close enough then well clap grapplers an old er close, while the archers picks em off. Tell em tget that rogue Galedeep first!

Rappsnout cackled happily as he leaped down to obey Strapps orders. He spat on his paw and patted a bulkhead. “Haharr, thats fer luck,

Shalloo, ole Rappsnoutll soon be yer new master. Ahoy, Snicker, get below an break out bows n arrers. Sharkoe, lay yer paws on some grapplin irons an lines. Jump to it, messmates. Were lucky rats this daya ship n crew an plunder too!

Finnbarr knew his old ship like the hairs on the back of his paw. He ordered triangle sails to be set between the bowsprit and the cable from the topmast, and two square sails sitting low amidships to port and starboard. It worked like a charm, lifting the forard end, and sending Pearl Queen skimming. Log-a-Log smiled at the sight of many searats crammed into the bows of Shalloo, sending her head deeper down and slowing her.

“Hoho, look at that, Finnbarr. Shalloos starting to wallow like an old leaky bucket!

Joseph came dashing up. “Finnbarr, whats that roaring noise I hear? he shouted.

The big sea otter grasped Josephs paw. “Come aloft with the Galedeep, Beilmaker, and Ill show ye!

Together they climbed into the rigging, and Finnbarr pointed directly on the course they were heading. “Theres a sight ye can tell yore grandmice about. Look at the hole in the sea, Joseph!

The sight took Josephs breath away. Less than a sea league southwest was a gigantic whirlpool, more than ten shiplengths wide, a complete circle, whirling around like a tornado, with a massive hole at its center. The roaring noise increased until it filled the air for miles around. Finnbarrs single eye watched it impassively.

“Few creatures ave ever seen it an lived. Tis called the Green Maelstrom. See there, it spins off south creatin the fastest part of the current they call Roaringburn!

Redoubtable as he was, Joseph found himself trembling with fear of the unknown hole in the deep. “But were heading straight for it, he said. “Well be sucked in!

Finnbarrs scarred face was grim as he grabbed Josephs paw. “Trust me. The Galedeep knows wot es about! Its not my ship thatll be pulled over the edge o the Green Maelstrom. No, thats where Shalloos bound for!

Joseph was horrorstruck. “Shalloo has two crews aboard her! he cried.

The sea otters face quivered with emotion. Joseph was not sure whether it was sea-spray or tears he saw running down from Finnbarrs single eye.

“Aye, two crews of murderin, torturin, fate-forsaken searats. I was the only one escaped when they captured Pearl Queenthey killed my ole crew, wife an two sons as well. Left me fer dead, but it takes moren searats to finish Finnbarr Galedeep. You can lay tthat! Now git below an foller me orders to the word, or well all find out what the earth below the igh seas looks like!

Capn Strapp was laying about with the flat of his cutlass at the rats crowding the bows. “Git back, yer shell-brained slackers, waitll I gives the word. Go an shove on more sailyore slowin the vessel by all pilin up ere. Belay an git back, I say!

Rappsnout came scurrying forward, still grinning. “Capn, Capn, looks like Pearl Queens flounderin. Shes limpin like a lame duck with all sails on the starboard side slack!

Strapp was jubilant at this sudden stroke of luck. “Har-arr, she aint goin nowheres. Ahoy, where are you lot off to? Git back up forard ere. Stan by with weapons an grapplin “ooks! Runnin with this gale, well hove alongside er in no time!

A rat in the rigging on lookout began shrieking, “Waaah, Capn! Theres a big ole in the seas!

Strapp shook his head in mock despair. “You bin up there too long, Drangle. Come on down.

But the lookout persisted. “I never seen nothin like it, Capn, off tthe souwest. Cant you ear the noise its makin?

Strapp could ignore the warning no longer, even though Shalloo was upwind of the maelstrom. At first he thought the roaring of the vortex was thunder, but there had been no lightning flashes. The Corsair Captain hauled himself high into the forepeak rigging to take a look. Most of the crew did, too, and the sight of the colossal whirlpool caused chaos.

“Drangles righttis a pit in the waters! “Put about or were all deadbeasts! “Well be sucked down into it, mates! “Bring er around, Capn, afore we perish! Strapp gritted his teethhe was determined to have the Pearl Queen. Luck had been with him so far; he had rid himself of his brother and gained another crew. Now after chasing the

prize halfway across the main he was not about to give up and turn tail. Booting the closest rats down to the deck, he railed at them.

“Down an stand ready, every rat jack of ye! I aint goin back empty clawed! Are you searats or landswabs? Wherever Pearl Queen goes, we can follow. Anybeast not with me is agin me, an its over the side with the cowards! Now look lively an jump to my biddin!

Spume and roaring water were everywhere, enveloping the crew of Pearl Queen. Log-a-Log and Finnbarr fought against the tiller as it bucked and yawed. The shrew Chieftain had to shout at the sea otter to be heard above the gale. “Are ysure you know what youre doin, Gale-deep?

Finnbarr laughed like a madbeast. “Yahaharr! Ive wrung more salt water out o me whiskers than that lot ave sailed on. Leave it tme! Keep those starboard sails slack an this rudder ard over. When I gives the word then pile the starboard sail back on an slack off the larboard sail, an swing this tiller over for all yore worth, matey. Joseph, get our crew up in the riggin, tell em to stand by. Rosie, marm,ow far off is Shalloo now?

Hon Rosie sloshed her way up to the high stern. “Less than forty shiplengths, bearing down fast, old thing! Her voice was cut off as Durry and Rufe fell from the rigging and clung tight to her neck, wailing.

“Well never see Red wall again!

“Were goin tfall off the seas edge into that pit!

Foremole and Joseph untangled them, the mole unable to tear his eyes from the maelstrom, which was hardly more than six shiplengths off now.

“Boi okey, ee mustve bed a gurt seabeast to dig an ole loik thatn, whurr, lookit er!

Pearl Queen seemed to be almost tottering on the brink of the whirling water tunnel now. The terrifying greeny-gray walls revolved at a breathtaking speed, a gaping hole reaching down, down, into mysterious darkness.

Joseph boosted Rufe and Durry aloft. “Come on, you two, Ill climb up there with you. Try not to look at the whirlpool and keep your ears pinned back for Galedeeps orders. Up you go!

“Finnbarr, here she comes. Rosies voice rose above the melee. “Shalloos sailin straight at us. Shell strike the center of our ship soon. Look out! Expertly Rosie caught the first grappling hook that shot out from Shal-loos bow and hurled it back, ducking a volley of arrows. Capn Strapps jubilant roars rang above the thunder of the Green Maelstrom.

“Lay on, buckoesshes ours, shes ours!

Suddenly Finnbarr was swinging the tiller over, calling out his orders: “Lash those starboard sails tight; let the wind catch er. Rosie, lend a paw on this tiller with men Log-a-Log! You shrews up there, look smart; slack off the sails on the larboard side. Move yerselves!

Durry labored furiously, trying to get his cold, spray-soaked paws to work on the ropes. Joseph toiled alongside him.

Rufes footpaws left the yardarm momentarily as a sail caught the wind and billowed out. “Whats the sea otter doin, Joseph sir? he cried. “Larboard, starboard, slack off an tighten up, pushin that tiller thing here an there; I dont unnerstand none of it.

The Bellmakers weatherbeaten face creased into a grim smile. “Nor do I, young un. Thats the thing about being crew, were not here to understand, just to obey orders. Though I think Finnbarr has left it too late. Duck! Arrows hissed viciously overhead as the three ducked.

The searats of the Shalloo were only a boatlength away. They crowded the bows of their ship, snarling as they fired arrows and whirled grappling hooks. Finnbarr held the tiller hard over as Rosie and Log-a-Log secured it in position with a rope halter. The larboard sails fluttered loose as Guosim shrews slacked them off. Shalloos bowsprit was a fraction from striking the Pearl Queen amidships when Finnbarrs sea skills paid off. The first six grappling hooks caught as it happened.

With a groaning of timber and creaking of rigging the Pearl Queen turned sideways! Finnbarr drew both the swords from their back scabbards, tossing one to Log-a-Log. Both creatures sprang to the rail, shearing the taut grappling lines with single strokes of the finely honed swords. Durry and Rufe stared wordlessly as Shalloo shot by them, her decks crowded with silent searats, numbed with shock as their ship caught the spinning edge of the Green Maelstrom. Halfway around the whirlpool it spun, hanging a split second in midair with its entire keel visible, then it tipped headfirst into the dark abyss. The

Shal-loo was gone into the depths, never to be seen again by living eyes.

A gasp of horror arose from the crew of the Pearl Queen. Then Finnbarr was in the midst of them shouting, “Save yer pity for the ones they murdered! Theyve gone where all searats should go, mates! Stand by, we aint safe yet by a long chalk!

Pearl Queen traveled sideways around the far outer rim of the whirlpool, seemingly helpless, until they jumped to obey Finnbarrs next commands.

“Pile on all sail agin, crew!

Slashing the rope that held the tiller, he centered it and held it level with Log-a-Log and Rosies help. When she saw what was happening the Hon Rosies natural exuberance returned in full force.

“Whoohahahooh! I say, chaps, the jolly old ships sailin straight again, an goin like the clappers. Whoo-hahahahoo!

Joseph looked behind him. The Green Maelstrom was rapidly disappearing in the distance as Pearl Queen rushed due south like a great sea eagle. He scrambled down from the rigging and ran to Finnbarr. Grasping the sea otters paw in both of his own, the Bellmaker shook it strongly.

“Roaringburn, you found it, were sailing south!

The whole crew gave a great cheer, and Finnbarr grinned crookedly as he turned to acknowledge the compliment.

Boom!

The sea otter was knocked flat on his tail as the vessel shuddered from stem to stern. He scrambled upright, shouting, “What is it? Whats happenin?

The shrew Bandle leaned out over the starboard rail. “Look, weve just passed a rock stickin up out the water. We musta struck it!

There was an instant flurry of activity; the crew scattered in all directions to inspect the vessel for damage. Finnbarr held the tiller, calling anxiously, “Is everythin shipshape?

There was a chorus of “ayes. Then Foremoles head appeared from the

forard rope locker.

“Zurr, thurrm a gurt ole in ee shipper ere. Hurr, ee waiter be a pouren in, oim afeared usns a sinken!

# Book Two

## 13

It was still an hour before afternoon tea at Redwall Abbey. Sister Sage put the finishing touches to a raspberry and apple pie and, wiping her paws on a flour-dusted apron, the old mouse stood back and watched Simeon, the blind Herbalist. He was lining hot vegetable pasties on the window ledge to cool, his experienced paws selecting the ones that were ready and replacing them with those fresh from the ovens. Sage poured out two beakers of the cold oatmeal and pennycloud water she had brewed early that morning.

“Come and have a break, Simeon. Ive got something here for you.

The blind mouse felt his way over to the table. “Ah, oatmeal and pennycloud. How thoughtful of you, Sage.

They sat listing the fare they had made, sipping slowly. “Raspberry and apple pie, strawberry tarts, nutbread, vegetable pasties, and a mixed fruit cake. That should be enough, Simeon. Oh, my mint teawhere is it? The blind ancient restrained Sage from rising. “I took it off the stove while you were baking, its cooling off in the big pottery jar.

Sage smiled, patting her friends paw. “Simeon, I dont know what Id do without you!

Gesturing for silence, Simeon turned his ear toward the window ledge and, as if speaking to nobeast, he said, “If those paws touch a single pastie, theyll be washing greasy pots for two seasons!

There was a gasp of surprise from the other side of the window ledge, followed by a scurry of paws running off. Again Simeon restrained Sage from rising. “No problem; I heard those Dibbuns sneaking up on our pasties a while back, little rascals. Though my ears tell me weve got a bigger problem coming our way.

Sage was about to inquire what it was, when the kitchen door swung open and Tarquin L. Woodsorrel breezed in.

“Phew, its a scorcher today! Afternoon, chaps. Howre things comin

along on the jolly old caterin front, wot?

Sister Sage coughed politely. “Very well, thank you, Mr. Woodsorrel. Is anything the matter?

Tarquins smile would have melted butter. “Matter? Why, no, my charming Queen of the Kitchens. Matter o fact, Im just here in me official capacity as sampler.

Simeon nodded knowingly. “I thought you might be. Theres a carrot and onion flan right behind you. Perhaps youd like to sample that.

The hungry hare spun around and turned his attentions to an oversized golden pastried creation. He wolfed down a huge mouthful as he spoke. “Mmf snch! My very, very favorite. I say, are we havin carrot onion flan for tea, chaps?

Simeon chuckled, shaking his head. “No, I made that specially for you, so you wouldnt sample the entire tea-time menu down to empty plates.

Tarquin ignored the remark and continued bolting hastily. “Grranph! Scuse me. What a considerate cove you are, Simeon.

Sage sniffed distantly as she watched Tarquin eating, then rose and went to the kitchen door. Striking a small riangle that hung over the doorway, she remarked pointedly, “I think we should get the servers in to take all this temptation out of your way, Mr. Woodsorrel. Im training some of the Dibbuns to take up table serving, you know. At the sound of the triangle, several Dibbuns trooped io and stood waiting for the trolleys to be loaded. Tarquin congratulated three of his own brood heartily. “Excellent!

Learnin a bit of waitin on; your mater will be proud of you when she gets back, wot?

Sage counted the number of Dibbun serving trainees. “Eight? Theres two missing.

“Right, paws up all those who arent here! Tarquin chortled.

Sister Sage turned on him severely. “Mr. Woodsorrel, fes no joking matter! These young ones have got to learn their responsibilities to others!

Tarquin swallowed the last of his flan apologetically. Oh, er, right you

are, marm, buckle down, do a bit of thingeeyin, does em the world of good. Now then, yousprogs, which two are absent? Speak up!

A small squirrel held up his paw. “Fink its the mouse-K$abe an Furrtil the mole, sir, he said.

The hare picked crumbs from his whiskers. “Mouse-babe an Furrtil, eh. Where would they be at?

“If we knew, then we could tell you, Daddy! one of the little leverets replied.

Tarquin blinked and twitched his ears. “Hmm, quite. What dyou think, Simeon? You know as much about bally Dibbuns as the next chap.

Simeon put aside his beaker and stood up. “Come on, Tarquin, wed best go and check all the gates. If theyre locked then nobeast has been out today and they should be somewhere inside the Abbey walls.

“But apposin a gates unlockered, sir? the small squirrel tugging Simeons robe asked.

The ancient mouse patted the Dibbuns bushy tail. “If a gates unlocked, that means a major search in Moss-flower after tea, my little friend.

Afternoon tea was taken in the orchard. Mother Mellus sat beneath a gnarled pear tree with Saxtus. The old badger was plainly worried; her pastie lay untouched as she confided to the Father Abbot.

“Its always that small wicker gate in the east wall, the one which leads straight into Mossflower Wood. Ive often said that the lock should be placed higher, so that tiny paws cant reach it. Ooh! That mousebabe, hes the one whos led Furrtil astray. Shes always been a splendid little mole maid, not a moments trouble until the mouse-babe comes along with one of his wild ideas.

Saxtus took her paw and squeezed it reassuringly. “Brother Fingle and some others are searching upstairs right now, so stop worrying, Mellus. Remember last week when the mousebabe and three others were found sleeping the Abbots bed in the dormitories?

Mellus took a halfhearted bite of her pastie. “I suppose youre right, friend. Lets wait and see. I wish we could contact Oak Tom and Treerose, but no beast ever seems to know what part of the woodlands theyre living in. They have a spring house, a summer residence ...

Saxtus squeezed her paw tighter. “Theyll be found. Now stop worrying and eat!

But the two Dibbuns were not found anywhere inside f, UK Abbey walls. Afternoon shadows were beginning to J lengthen, tea was long finished. Tarquin lined up a score 3-.qf Redwallers, then, pacing up and down in front of them, i, .lie gave his orders.

“Right, listen up in the ranks now! Proceed out of the east wallgate into the forest, spread out in line an comb the area. Leave no stone unturned. No questions? Good, if. lets make a start, then. By the left, quick march!

High sun lanced down through the leafy greenery of still depths, while somewhere in the distance a oo call echoed through glade and copse. River Moss many tributaries. One of them, a small, slow-flowing stream, had two small visitors on its bank that afternoon. A purloined dormitory sheet from Redwall Abbey was draped over a low willow bough to form a tent, and inside Sal the mousebabe and the little molemaid Furrtil, un-fpware of the upset they had caused, playing at Dibbun games. The mousebabe carried a stick, which he fondly imagined was the sword of Martin the Warrior, while Forrtil was armed with a knotted length of twine, obvi

Marie! s Gullwhacker. She swiped at an inquisitive gnat with it. “Oi be gurtly ungered, Marthen. Usns missed tea.

Martin, alias the mousebabe, tied a thread to his stick. “Nev mind, Mariel. I catch us a big fish inna river.

“Hurr, whurr ee be getten fires to cookn et?

The mousebabe thought about this a moment, then tossing aside the thread he lay down. “We goin asleep then. Warriors got to ave sleep!

“Hurr, but oi doant bee toired.

“Course youre tired, the mousebabe snorted impatiently. “All a beasts gets tired!

“Oi dearly loikes tgo back to ee Abbey furr supper, then oi be sleepen in moi own bed ifn oi toired.

The mousebabe sat up, throwing a comforting paw about Funtils neck as they both watched the stream drifting by. “Mm, I wanna go back to the Abbey, too. We sit ere til they comesn finds us, eh?

Furrtil shook her head despairingly at this announcement. “O. gurt seasons! Youm gotten uz lost, baint you?

Her companion fidgeted moodily with a dandelion. “Not lost, just don know a way back, sall. They always come an find us, you see, always come an say, Likkle rogues, worry us a death, very naughty!

The molemaid giggled at the mousebabes imitation of Mother Mellus. “Hurr hurr, ee sounden same as owd badgermum.

Slipp and Blaggut were lost, too. They had strayed from the main course of River Moss in the shrewboat and now lay becalmed up a tributary. Slipp had decided the blame lay with Blaggut.

“Yew arf-baked barnacle, what did yer bring us up this ere backwater for?

The searat knew he dare not argue with his Captain, so he shrugged with an injured air. “Capn?

Slipp was working himself up into a fine temper, and drawing his cutlass slowly he imitated Blagguts voice.

“Capn, Capn, is that all ycan say, Capn, Capn? Ill Capn yer, you useless lump o seaslop. Now over the side with yer carcass an get pullin on that eadrope afore I carves yer into crabmeat!

Stifling a sigh of resignation, Blaggut heaved his bulk over the bows, drawing in a swift gasping breath at the streams chill. Shouldering the headrope he began towing the shrewboat behind him, but not without protest.

“Id be better off paddlin, Capn. Spose there was heels an those ungry pikefishes swimmin in these ere » waters. I could get meself et up, an youd ave tgo it alone ...

Slipp snorted at the idea. “Pikes V eels got more sense than to try an eat a big, fat, poison blubbergut like you. Just keep eavin on that rope til I tells yer tstop!

The searat heaved, but kept up his complaints. “The bottoms all muddy an squishy Capn, spose I sinks outer sight, sucked under like ...

Slipp lay back in the boat, letting sun patterns play over him as the trees went by. “No such luck, barrelbum. This streams got too much respect fer itself than to ave the likes of you layin in the mud like a

dirty great porpoise. Pull, ye swab!

The sun was beginning to dip low as Tarquin halted his searchers. He squinted up at the sky before nodding decisively. “Thats as far as we go in this direction, chaps. The little uns like those couldnt have got further than this.

Brother Mallen, a young mouse, who himself had been a Dibbun until four seasons ago, held up his paw. “Mr. Tarquin, sir, youd be surprised at how far two Dibbuns can go in one afternoon. Maybe we should press on to the River Moss and search over that way.

“Youre barkin up the wrong tree, laddie, said the hare, staring down his nose for a moment at the Brother. “Take mword for it; I know about these things. When yve got a few seasons under ybelt, like me, youll know how to track an search expertly. Meanwhile, I suggest we spread out further apart an comb the bally old country tthe east, makin a sweep down south toward old Saint Ninians church. Righto, troop, as ywere, thrash the jolly bushes an shrubs with your staves, call out the names loud, Funthingee an wotsismouse, no slackin, be dark before yknow it!

The Redwallers moved off into the undergrowth, shaking bushes and calling aloud as they moved in a southeastward sweep. Off in the opposite direction to the lost Dibbuns.

Slipp yanked at the headrope impatiently, sending Blag-gut sprawling backward into the water. “Take me into the bank, over there by that big tree! he barked.

Coughing streamwater, Blaggut obediently pulled until the shrewboat was banked, then he looped the headrope round the three-topped oak his Captain had indicated.

“Capn?

The searat Captain ambled ashore and slumped against the oak as if wearied after a hard days toil. “Capn, apn, there you go again! Now lissen hard, cocklebrains, mark this tree, remember where it is, an dont get lost. Take yore moldy carcass off into these woods an get me some vittles.

Blaggut stared hopefully at Slipp. “Vittles, Capn? “Aye, vittles, Capn! You know wot vittles is, dont yer? Food to shove in yore face; berries, nuts, fruit, there must be stuff aplenty to eat in this jungle. Get goin!

Blagguts dull features brightened.

“Aye, aye, Capn, vittles! Ill bring yer all I kin lay claws on, an water to drink as well.

Slipp glared at the westering sun as if it were partly to blame, then he smiled disarmingly at his servant. “Weve been surrounded by fresh streamwater all day, nitbrains.

Wot would we need more for? Look, just go an get the vittles, will yer? An remember the way back.

Blaggut stumbled off into the woodland muttering to himself. “No water, jus vittles, an remember the way back, got it. No vittles jus remember an water if ycome back, or was it dont remember water an no vittles on the way back ...

Slipp covered his head with both paws and slept.

Mellus and Saxtus, with several of the old and Very young, stood on the path outside Redwall Abbeys &. west side. They held lanterns high, even though there was a full moon to give good light.

Blind Simeon turned his face south. “Is that the search coming from the direction of Saint Ninians? he

“It is indeed, said Sister Sage, peering down the path. Though I dont see the Dibbuns with them.

“Have they been eaten by wildbeasts, Mellus? one of the leverets piped up.

The old badger cuffed the young hares ears gently. “Of course not, and dont let me hear you spreading horrible stories around. By rights you should be in bed!

Weary and paw-sore, the search party halted in front of the main gate. Tarquin threw the reception committee a tired salute. “No sign of the little uns at all, Im afraid; we covered a wide area, north, east, and south, no joy whatsoever.

The Abbot studied his paws in the moonlight. “You did all you could. Come in now, weve held supper over for you. Tomorrow well start the search again at first light. Inside, you Dibbuns. Come on now, bedtime.

The Redwallers drifted into the Abbey grounds. Tarquin stayed back with Blind Simeon to secure the main gate for the night.

“Perhaps wed better post sentries on the wall, they might wander home during the night, said the blind sage as he felt about for the barlock. “Dearie me, I cant help wishing that Joseph were here, hed know what to do.

Blaggut made his way back to the oak on the streambank, more by luck than judgment. He shook the sleeping form of his Captain vigorously. “Capn, Capn, guess wot I found?

Slipp yawned and blinked in the darkness. “Dont tell me, a cask of seaweed grog and a roasted gull!

“O, thats a good un, yer a one you are, Capn! Blag-gut chuckled heartily.

Slipp grabbed hold of the slow-witted searat. “Im an ungry one right now, flopead. Wheres those vittles?

“O er, vittles, er, there wasnt none, Blagguts voice rattled on with excitement. “But I found two Hddle beasts asleep; theyre livin in a tent jus a stroll further up the bank, Capn!

“You didnt wake em, did yer?

“No, Capn. Bless their liddle earts, they looked so peaceful. I came right back ere t let you know.

Slipp released Blaggut and shook his paw. “Thats the first sensible thing youve done today, mate. Now you lead me to em, nice an quiet like!

# 14

The onset of night in the dungeons of Castle Floret weighed deeply on Mariel and Dandin. They sat on the wide window ledge, tired, hungry, and sore, watching the moon hanging like a buttered disc over the valley. Mariel was using the rope that had bound their footpaws to fash-ion a new Gullwhacker. As she worked, she wondered dolefully if she would ever get a chance to use it.

Dandin, half awake and half asleep, was imagining himself back at his beloved Redwall, strolling through the moonlit orchard with his friend Saxtus after supper, as the great Joseph bell softly boomed out the quarter; hearing the distant voice of Mother Mellus from the dormitory windows as she shooed Dibbuns off to bed; sensing the odors of apple, plum, strawberry, and pear on the still, fragrant air. He was roused from his reverie by Mariels voice.

“How does he do it? That old Field Marshal will sleep through anythinglook at him.

Meldrum the Magnificent was lying full stretch, his weighty stomach rising and falling to each snore. Dandin watched him, envious of the hares capacity to recede into slumber at the wink of an eye.

Mariel stared up at the moon, speaking her thoughts aloud. “That same moon will be shining over the Abbey now. Ill bet my dad has taken himself off to bed; hes another one who can sleep anytime, night or day, it makes no difference to him.

Dandin looked away from the window to the stark, hostile interior of their cell, “Makes you wonder if we11 ever see Redwall again, he said, his voice wistful. “Though at the moment a beaker of water and a crust of bread would be a welcome sight.

To take her friends mind off food, Mariel climbed down from the window ledge and said, “We havent explored this cell yet. Come onlets see if we can find a weak spot to escape from.

Dandin slid from the window ledge to join her. “It all looks pretty solid and secure to me; they didnt build this place with a view to letting anyone break out.

Together they inspected the dungeon. Walls and floor alike were heavy, close-jointed stone. Dandin tried probing the narrow cracks

with his paws but soon gave up. “Hammer and chiseld help. Know anywhere we could borrow em? he said.

Mariel was staring upward. “Hmm, ceilings the same, rock solid. Lets take a look at the window bars.

Meldmm was lying in their way, and they had to move him. The old hare opened one eye and muttered, “Whatn the name of flattened frogs are you chaps up to? Distur-bin my nocturnal repose, wot. No respect for age at all, thats the trouble with this young generation!

“Were sounding the place out, looking for ways of escape, said Mariel suppressing a smile. “Dyou mind moving away from the bars, sir?

Meldrum moved, rather huffily. “Whatcha goin tdo, rip the bars out an fly away?

Dandin was kicking the bars with his footpaws. “A chance is a chance, no matter how slim. Huh, its no chance here thoughcreature who put these bars in knew what he was doing. Theyre bedded tight, set in the stone with molten lead; deep, too, I imagine.

Meldrum sat up. He stretched and yawned. “Ah well, no rest for the righteous, I spose. So then, escape ysay, lets see. How did we get into this lockup?

“How did we get in here? said Mariel, looking at him quizzically. “Obviously by way of the door!

The hare wiggled his ears so that they rubbed together. “Full marks, young mouseygel. Now youre startin to think properly, wot! Stands to reason, dont it, if the door is the entrance its also the bally exit. Doors were made to close ... and open, so lets inspect the jolly old portal!

Together the three captives moved to the door. Mariel and Dandin, bowing to Meldrums seniority, let him take over. “Righty ho, young Dandin, bang loudly on this door, please.

Without question Dandin started thumping as hard as he could. Nothing happened for a moment, then there was a sound of footpaws and a drowsy, irritable guards voice rasped out, “Stop that bangin in there, prisoners!

Meldrum adopted a whimpering tone. “Please, sir, we want a drink of water.

His plea was followed by a harsh laugh from the guard.

“Water? You three aint allowed no water. Huh, only water youll get is when they fling yer dead bodies inter the moat, now be quiet or youll get a taste of me spear-point. Shurrup, dyer ear?

This was followed by footpaws receding along the outside corridor. Meldrum winked, signaling them to keep their voices low. “Number one, weve established that theres a sentry on duty, out there night an day if Im not mistaken. Two, the villains armed with a spear; thatll come in useful when the time comes.

“What time, and how can a guard with a spear be useful to us? said Dandin.

The hare frowned. “Dont interrupt, laddie, unless yve got somethin useful tsay. Now, about this door ... Im willin to wager its got a simple dungeon lock; see if you can take a quick peek.

Dandin boosted Mariel up to the spyhole. By pushing her face hard sideways into it she strained her eye downward and was able to view the contrivance. “Youre right, sir, she said. “Its just a long bolt that pushes through a staple driven into the side wall, no real locks or keys. “Good, good, exactly as I thought! Meldrum snorted with satisfaction.

Dandin let Mariel down quietly. She shrugged saying, “Its a very strong bolt though, and weve no chance at all of reaching it.

Meldrum was busily scanning the other side of the door. “Why should we want treach it? Locks probly the strongest part of the door; were lookin for the weakest.

“And what part is that, sir? Mariel inquired.

The hare smiled craftily. “The hinges, of course! This is bettern I thought. Just look at these hinges, stupid things! The buffer who erected this door placed the hinges on the inside. Weakest part of a door, hinges, yknow, and these are no exception. Simple pin flattened both ends is the only thing holding this top one together; bottoms the same. Half rusted, too, I shouldnt wonder. There ygo, young warriors, remove two hingepins an the door can be shoved outward!

Dandin rubbed his paws delightedly. “Aye, and if we shove hard enough, the staple holding the bolt will be torn out of the wall by a big heavy door like this. The whole thing will fall flat into the

corridor!

“I hate to put a damper on things, said Mariel, interrupting his jubilation, “but how are we going to cut through the hingepins with no tools?

Meldrum stroked his twirling mustachio thoughtfully. “Good question, good question. Ah well, a chaps got to make sacrifices, only one thing for it.

He inspected the medals left on his tunicsome of them had been lost as they were dragged along. Choosing carefully, he selected a huge, silver-colored orb with serrated edges. “See this? Order of the shining sun. Presented tme by molescant recall exactly what it was forjolly pretty though, doncha think. Very hard metal, made by mole craftbeasts, should do the job.

Mariel tore a strip from the edge of her tunic and wound it around the bar that held the medal. “Dandin, work on the hingepins together. Meldrum, sir, keep ;jm eye to the spyhole in case the guard comes.

Dandin took first try. Grunting with exertion, he and sawed with the medal. He rewound the strip of cloth around it often, as his paws got scratched and tender.

A quarter of the way through the bottom hingepin, Marie! relieved him, hacking and sawing busily. “Were not making too much noise, are we, sir? Can you see the guard?

Meldrum kept his eye glued to the spyhole. “No, not really, but I think the blighters kippin. I can hear him snore every now an then. Hows it goin?

“Its hard, but Im making good progress, said Mar-iel, groaning as she changed position. “Just a bit more on this one. Dandin, shove your footpaw against my back so I can lean harder on the medal. Thats it! A moment later she straightened up, holding a small length of rusty iron in her paw. “There it is, the bottom hingepin!

Heartened by the sight, Meldrum spat on his paws and took the medal from them. “You two take turns at the spyhole, leave the top hinge tme, wot?

Using his considerable weight and strength the hare went at the hingepin with a good deal of brute force. His sizeable stomach wobbled back and forth as he sawed, talking all the time to the

remaining pin. “Hah! Think ycan stand against the strongest hare alive, eh? Let me tell you, mlittle feller, Ive picked bigger than you out o me molars after a good dinner!

Gritting his teeth, Meldrum braced long hindpaws against the floor as he worried and tugged the hingepin. “Come out! Out, I say, sir! Gotcha, you rusty blighter! The door stood free of its hinges, held only by the bolt staple. Meldrum the Magnificent winked at his comrades. “Stage one completed! Stage two, how to proceed with a simple escape. Lissen carefully in the ranks than!

The rat on guard was rudely awakened by panicked cries from the new prisoners.

“Guard, help, help! Aagh! Look whats in our cell! Help!

Grumbling to himself, he shouldered his spear and lurched dozily along the corridor. “Wot is it now? Will you three in there give your gobs a rest! Soon as I can, Im goin to ave yous gagged! He appeared at the spyhole waving his spear. “Shut that noise up, wots the matter ... ?

Dashing from the far side of the cell the three prisoners hurled themselves bodily at the door.

Crash!

The staple holding the bolt flew from the wall as the door thudded flat into the corridor with the guard beneath it. Reaching under the door, Meldrum retrieved the guards spear and unfastened the keys from his belt. Marie! twirled her new Gullwhacker.

Dandin motioned them to be silent. “Sshh! Lets wait a moment to see if the noise has alerted anybeast ...

They stood stock-still for a short while. There was no response or indication that anyone had heard. Meldrum stole softly down the corridor, spear poised, to see if rats were on their way. As he passed one cell, a hoarse voice called him. “Meldrum the Magnificent, is it really you?

The hare had to look twice through the spyhole before he recognized the cells occupant. “Seasons of slaughter! King Gael!

Swiftly unlocking the door, he hauled forth a squirrel, thin to the point of emaciation. Mariel and Dandin hurried forward to help support the frail figure of the Squirrelking.

A raucous cackle issued from the next cell. “Gwaw! Norra nuff to mayka dinna thirr!

Dandin peered through the spyhole, but withdrew hastily as the tip of a pointed beak sought his eye. Meldrum drew him to one side and, using the speartmtt, the hare rapped the beak sharply until it withdrew. Standing a cautious distance away, he looked through the spyhole.

Mariel was filled with curiosity. “What is it? Whats in there? she said.

“Kchakchakcha! Glokkpod inna hirr! “By the ancient ears of me grandsires, said Meldrum, turning to Mariel and Dandin, “its a shrike! “Whats a shrike? both mice chorused together. The hare pointed to the cell with his spear. “A maniac killer, thats what a shrike is. Butcher Birds some call em! Not as big as some owls, biggern most hawks hereabouts, but more dangerous than the lot of em! Stab yto death with that beak an hang you out on a thombush like some cob o meat, thats why theyre known as Butcher Birds. Very rare, stremely dangerous!

There was a flap on the bottom of the door to allow food to be pushed in. Meldrum held it up to let his friends see the shrike.

Gael sat against the far wall of the corridor breathing heavily.

“Hes called Glokkpod, said the Squirrelking. “He flew in there when they were replacing the old bars, and they blocked the window. Poor birds been living in the darkthey torment it with spears just for ftm.

Mariel and Dandin could see the strange bird. It was indeed a great, red-backed shrike. The mousemaid murmured in a kindly tone to it, “Hello there, dont be afraid of us. Im Mariel and this is Dandin, Meldrum, and Gael.

Obviously crazed through captivity, the shrike laughed. “Kchakchakcha! I Glokkpod, fraida nothin, Glokkpod killa! Watcha me alltime, badbird!

Dandin looked away from the wild glittering eyes. “Whew! Wouldnt like to meet him on a dark night.

Glokkpod inched closer to the flap. “Wouldan like meet me anytime, mousa!

Meldrum shoved the shrike back with his spearbutt, saying, “This is

gettin us nowhere, chaps. Weve got to make good our escape an take poor ol Gael with us. I say there, Glukkpuddle, or whatever ycall yself, listen! If you aint with us, youre against us. Fraid I havent time t bandy words with you, understand?

He received a swift reply. “Openna door longears, Glokkpod witcha, killa rats, lotsa rats!

The hare unlocked the cell and, standing to one side, be shoved the door open with his speartip. Glokkpod hopped out, eyes glittering, beak flicking from side to side. “Glokkpod badbird, killa anybist!

Mariel whispered to Dandin, “Looks like weve caught a whirlwind by the tail! Swinging her Gull whacker, she brought it within a hairbreadth of the shrikes eye. “Try killing this bist, and youre a loser!

Completely unafraid, Glokkpod winked one beady eye at her. “Glokkpod make jokah, kchakchakcha! Ony killa rats!

“Help! Help! Murder! Escapin prisoners, rouse the guard! The rat sentry had crawled out from under the fallen doorhe scampered off down the corridor in the opposite direction of the escapers, shrieking full blast. He was too far away to be caughtMeldrums spear bounced harmlessly off the wall, and he threw up his paws in disgust.

“Tchah! Thats blown it; theyll be on us in force soon. Which way now. We cant go down, theyll be comin up!

Mariel shouldered her Gullwhacker. “Like I said yesterday, theres only one way to go. Up!

The sound of masses of hordebeasts dashing toward them clinched the issue. Supporting Gael, the three friends sped along the corridor and up the flight of stairs at the far end. Glokkpod brought up the rear.

It was a stone spiral staircase, and it did not take them long to realize they were in a narrow round tower. The stairs seemed to continue endlessly upward, terminating in a small circular chamber. Sounds of guards pounding their way upward reached them. Dandin shut the door and barred it from the inside. Crossing to a narrow slit window he looked out.

“Were twice as high up as we were before; it makes me dizzy just looking down. Were as high up as anybeast can go in this castle. Lets face it, weve trapped ourselves good and proper this time!

As he spoke, the first spearblades and axeheads came crashing through the door.

# 15

Late afternoon found Pearl Queen riding dangerously low in the water. Heavy, swelling seas and an overcast sky were causing Finnbarr Galedeep problems. He muttered from between clenched teeth to Joseph as they fought to push the tiller hard over. “Were shippin too much water, mate. Got to get er out o this Roarnburn current an find land where we can make the Queen shipshape agin!

A fork of lightning crackled across the western horizon. Joseph glanced up at the storm-bruised clouds. “Aye, and wed better make land soon, Finnbarr.

Durry and Rufe stood in line, passing basins, bowls and bucketsanything the crew could lay their paws on to pass down the forard locker, where Log-a-Log and Rosie were bailing out furiously.

Foremole felt useless. Stricken by a severe attack of seasickness, he sat in the scuppers moaning softly. “Hurr, oi must be the furst ever green mole t put t sea. Burr, shame on oi! Ow be it goin, maister Quill?

Durry staggered on the bucking deck as he emptied a bucket over the side. “Not good at all, Foremole; the waters coming in so fast an the seas so heavy that its making the hole bigger! Thunder boomed directly overhead, causing the crew to jump.

Finnbarr yelled orders as he clung gamely to the tiller. “Slack sail afore were driven under. Slack sail! Keep balin below decks there, messmates ... Whooooooooaaah! Pearl Queen lurched mightily as she stewed out of the Roaringburn current to eastward. Rain came in torrents, lashing and stinging, wind-driven curtains of it, until it was difficult for the crew to see one another. Night set in without warning, aided by the dark stormy skies. Pearl Queen was driven scudding sideways across the face of the deeps, sails torn and flapping, lines and ropes whipping viciously, and masts creaking as she settled lower in the water.

“Belay the bailin, Finnbarr bellowed. “ Tis doin no good; were in the paws o fate now, mateys. Lash yerselves fast to anythin that wont be washed overboard!

Rosie and Log-a-Log were hauled out of the locker. They grabbed ropes and made themselves fast to the rails with the rest of the crew.

Several of the shrews trapped Foremole as he came rolling past, a wet, furred ball of misery. “Wohurr, let oi be drownded zurrs, loif baint gudd no mores furr the loikes of oi. Buhurr!

Drenched as he was, Durry could see that Rufe was weeping from the way his body shook in the ropes that held him fast. The good hedgehog clutched his friend tightly. “Bad luck fer us all, Rufey, but you stick by me and well go down tgether. I wont leave ye to sink alone, Rufe Brush.

The young squirrel buried his head against Durrys chest where the spines gave way to softer fur. “Will they remember us for a long time at Redwall, Durry? he wept.

The hedgehog gagged as he spat salt spray from his mouth. “Always, Rufe, thats how long theyll recall us. Father Abbot11 put up a marker stone with our names on, an Mother Mellusll teach young Dibbuns about us an how bravely we perished. Well be famous, I bet.

Chain lightning lit up the whole eastern horizon as Joseph looked up. Suddenly he smiled through the torrential gale and cried out, “Land ho!

Finnbarr Galedeep grabbed Josephs paw in a viselike grip. “Land ye say, Bellmakerwhere away?

“Due east. Were headed straight for it; thats if we dont fill up and sink first. Keep looking east, Finnbarr. Next lightning flash will light it up.

All the sea otter could see was black night, rain, and spray in front of him. Suddenly there was a roll of thunder and sheet lightning illuminated everywhere, revealing a rocky coastline jutting up less than a league away! The realization that he could save his ship and crew sent Finnbarr roaring out commands again. “Untie yerselves, mates. Start bailin agin! Log-a-Log, get yoreself in the bows an watch out for reefs! Hoist forard sails to keep er stem up! Lively nowjump to it, me lucky buckoes!

Pearl Queen became a hive of activity amid the storm. Even Foremole picked himself up at the mention of land and began bailing furiously. While Joseph supervised fleck operations, Rosie took several creatures up into the rigging to set the sails. Rufe and Durry scurried raid to the highest sails, Rosie ahead of them. The vessel heeled perilously as a towering wave struck her broadside on, and there was a piercing squeal.

The shrew named Patch had been swept from a lower yardarm, and now he hung upside down, one footpaw snarled in a rope line. Rufe Brush was the only one who could see Patch, dangling wrong way up, his head dipping under every time the ship swayed to port. Leaving Durry and Rosie to deal with the topsails, Rufe climbed back down to help the shrew. Battered by the blinding spray Rufe inched out along the low yardarm, calling to the shrew, “Hang on, matey. Im comin!

The entire yardarm dipped deep below the seas boiling surface. Rufe locked both footpaws and tail around the timbers and reached out, catching Patch by his ears. He pulled and hauled, the shrew alternately screeching in pain and swallowing water, but Rufe tugged savagely, knowing if he let go, Patch was lost. With a mighty effort he hauled the shrew right side up, draping him across the yardarm. Rufe snatched the rapier from Patchs belt and hacked loose the rope that had trapped the shrews foot-paw. Then, fastening the unconscious shrew close to him with his own belt, Rufe clambered down into Finnbarrs waiting paws and collapsed with Patch in a heap on the deck.

The sea otter blew stormwater from his whiskers, shaking his head in admiration at the plucky rescue. “Yore a brave liddle beast, Rufe. I never seen a creature so game in all me born days, an thats a fact!

Suddenly a single clap of thunder rang out directly above Pearl Queen, followed by an immense lightning bolt that struck the ship. An eerie blue light enveloped every creature aboard, as their fur stood out straight from their bodies. There was a rending crack; the foremast snapped like a twig and was hurled off into the darkness.

“Durry! Rosie! Theyve gone! Rufe Brush screamed. “They were up the mast!

Joseph had to grab Rufethe young squirrel was about to dive over the side and swim to find his friends. The Bellmaker held the kicking, struggling squirrel fast. “Rufe, Rufe, have ygone mad? Youd be drowned in a trice out therewe cant even see where the mast went!

But there was no reasoning with the squirrel. He fought Joseph wildly, striking him with all paws. “Let me go! Ive got to save Durry, hes all Ive got!

Joseph flinched as Rufes paws battered his face. He held on grimly until there was nothing else for it.

Whack!

The sturdy Bellmaker laid Rufe senseless with a single blow to the squirrels jaw, then he laid him down safe. “Poor Rufe, I wish you hadnt made me do that.

For what seemed endless hours the crew of the Pearl Queen battled with the elements, fighting to bring their vessel to the land, which now appeared temptingly close, but so difficult to reach. Windblown and soaked they moved with frozen paws and numbed minds, automatically forcing themselves to go about their tasks. Log-a-Log was standing far out on the prow, watching for hidden rock shoals, and he did not have time to brace himself when Pearl Queen shuddered and ground to a halt. The shrew Chieftain was thrown overboard. Fore-iinole saw him go; he ran to the bows yelling, “Shrew woverboooooooard! *

The crew dashed forard in Log-a-Logs wake, stop-sharply as they reached the bows.

“Hohohoho, lookit me! It was Log-a-Log, standing only waist deep in the water.

Finnbarr Galedeep drew both his swords, brandishing them at the storm and the heaving seas. “Haharr, we beat yer; you never got Galedeep an the Queen that time!

Carrying Rufe on his back, Joseph called everybeast to abandon ship and make their way to shore. Foremole moved with a speed not associated with his kindhe fairly scooted through the shallows to the dry land, where, lying flat on the beach, he kissed it fervently. “Oo urr, oi luvs ee gudd furm urth!

The remainder of the night the crew spent miserably, crouching behind a rocky outcrop, as the storm spent its fury over the heaving seas, driving Pearl Queen even farther up onto the tideline. Without food or drink they huddled together, utterly spent and fatigued. Through the gray dawn they slept, unaware that the storm had abated and the tide had slipped silently out leaving Pearl Queen high and dry, listed over at a crazy angle. High, rolling clouds drifted westward on a calming breeze while the skies turned deep blue.

The warm sun beating down on his back, mingled with the plaintive cry of seabirds, gradually brought Joseph awake. He sat up stiffly and looked around. They were on a wide sandy beach, backed by huge brown cliffs dotted with greenery. Pearl Queen had been washed up only paces away from where the BeUmaker sat. Sometime before

dawn Rufe Brush had regained consciousness, only to cry himself back to sleep with the realization that Durry had been lost at sea. Joseph drew quietly away from his slumbering form, seeing Finnbarr up and about.

The sea otter had boarded his vessel and found food for breakfast, and now he was busy building a fire from dry driftwood he had gathered above the tideline. Smiling kindly, he greeted Joseph. “Mornin tye, BeUmaker. Lend a paw ere. Well get vittles goin fer the crew atween us.

They mixed oatmeal with dried fruit and a little fresh water to make flat moist cakes, which they laid on a metal shield from the ships armory and placed over the fire. Taking dried mint leaves and honey, Joseph put them in a pan Finnbarr had brought from the ship and soon had a fine brew of mint tea boiling.

“Mmm, is that mint tea an oat scones I smell? Log-a-Log came to squat by the fire, followed by the others as the rest of the crew came awake.

Breakfast was taken thankfully. They sat on the sun-warmed sands, glad to be alive after their ordeal on the deep. Finnbarr retrieved a batch of fresh-baked scones from the shield, nodding toward his ship. “Straight after brekkist, wed best take a look at the Queen, shes in need of a new foremast an a repair job to er hull fer starters. No tellin wot else needs doin.

Joseph sat with a comforting paw about Rufe. The young squirrel was eating: hunger and thirst had driven lum, with the BeUmakers urging, to take some breakfast. ;.,. Joseph indicated Rufe with a nod of his head. “Finn-, the first thing we must do is to remember our two lends who were lost in last nights storm.

“Aye, right you are mate, said the sea otter, putting his breakfast. “Lets do that here an now!

A small stone cairn was built on the shore above the tide-line soon afterward. With Josephs help, Rufe had taken a piece of flat timber and burned a message upon it with a heated knife. The crew of Pearl Queen stood around the neat heap of stones as Rufe fixed the wood securely between the top stones facing seaward. Log-a-Log read the simple message.

“To the memory of Rosie Woodsorrel, warrior and mother. Also Durry Quill, Cellarmaster. Two Redwall friends.

Still with his paw about Rufes shoulder, Joseph recited some words he had put together for the ceremony:

“Friend is a very small word, A little sound we make, For one who is true, one who will do, Great deeds for friendships sake. So while I grieve for you, my friends. Who gave all that you could give, Youll be my friends in memory, For all the days Ill live.

Tears ran openly down Foremoles honest face. “Oi doant be knowen wot zurr Tarquin an ee Hddle uns be a doin wiout miz Rose; theym be gurtly sad!

Log-a-Log patted the stones. “I know it sounds funny, but I miss that laugh of Rosies.

The shrew Patch took Rufe earnestly by his paw. “Lis-sen, young un, some good always comes out o misfortune. Ifn youd been up that mast, then youd have been lost with em. But you aint lost, an I aint neither, cos you risked your life an saved mine. Rufe, Im your friend for life now!

Though Finnbarr Galedeep was a tough-looking otter, he was deeply touched at the sight of Rufe and Patch shaking paws together over the cairn. The sea otter turned away, gazing at the high cliffs to forestall a tear dropping. But he soon forgot his sorrow.

“Stand by, crew, git yoreselves armed! Weve got visitors, an theyre a-comin fast!

Loud war whoops split the summer morning air as masses of creatures poured down from the cliffs, heading straight for the crew of Pearl Queen.

# 16

The two Dibbuns huddled together in terror as the ugly heads of Slipp and Blaggut poked into their makeshift tent. The searat Captain snarled at them. “Give us vittles, or well eat yer!

Blaggut was horrified by Slipps pronouncement. “O, Capn, you wouldnt eat two pretty liddle babbies like them, would yer?

Slipp bit Blagguts ear and punched his snout. “Will you shuttup an let me do the talkin, doodlenose!

Despite his smarting ear and throbbing nose, Blaggut winked chummily at the Dibbuns. “Never fear, me liddle chicks, ole Capn Slipp wont eat yer. Hes got an eart of gold!

Slipp yanked Blaggut out of the tent and began booting his rump soundly. “I told yer once already, scrummit-chops, keep yer stupid mouth shut until I tells yer to speak ....Yowch!

The mousebabe had regained his confidence and was jabbing his “sword stick in Slipps back. “You leava im alone, big bully! he squeaked.

“Ooh, me liver n kidneys!

Slipp sat down nursing his back. Blaggut was all concern. “Aye aye, liddle feller, that was a naughty thing ter do. Youve gone an urted the pore Capns livers n kidney. Ere, let me elp yer up, Capn. Are you shipshape?

Slipp drew his cutlass, raging, “Ill slice that cheeky snippet in arf afore Vs much older. Let me at the swab!

Blaggut placed himself between the mousebabe and Slipp. “You kin cut me in three arfs ifn yer like Capn, but dont yew lay a blade near that there hinfant!

Funtil had regained her composure by now. She attached herself to Blagguts leg, chuckling, “Oi loik ee, zurr. Youm a funny vurmint!

“Dyer ear that, Capn? The liddle molemaid likes me! The searats face was a picture of delight.

Slipps voice dripped sarcasm that was lost on the unwitting Blaggut. “Ho, she likes yer, does she? Well, aint that nice. Why dont we all siddown an ave a picker-nick?

The big, slow searat patted his Captain affectionately, nearly knocking him flat. “Arr thats the spirit, Capn. 1 knew youd see tilings my way.

Slipps sea-booted footpaw began moving in the direction of Blagguts behind. Hie mousebabe brandished his stick, squeaking, “You kickim, an I stick your livers a kiddies ... !

Slipp stamped his foot down and glared at the mousebabe. “Dont yew ave no vittles at all?

The mousebabe thought about this for a moment, then replied, “Wots vikkles?

Blaggut sat down next to the Dibbun, chuckling. “Hoho, bless yer liddle eart, matey. Vittles is food!

“Hurr, food! Furrtil nodded understandingly. “Loik pudden an pie an cakes an soop?

“Yes, yes, thats the stuff, Slipp said, nodding eagerly. “Puddenpiecake an soup. Where is it? Ave you got any?

The mousebabe thought quite deeply about the question, then stated matter-of-factly, “No!

Blaggut laughed until tears rolled down his ugly face. “That babbie mouse is a cool un, Capn!

Funtil trundled off into the woodland. Slipp looked after the molemaid curiously. “Where does she think shes off to? he asked.

The mousebabe curled his lip scornfully at Slipps ignorance. “Vurmint your size shoulda know tha*. She gone to get food vikkles for ya, shoopid!

The searat Captain brought his face close to the Dibbun, sneering nastily. “Dont call me stupid, and Im a rat, not a vurmint!

The mousebabe sat himself on Blagguts lap in a businesslike manner and explained patiently to Slipp, “Rats is vurmints. Anybeast know tha, an1 if you not shoopid then don ask shoopid questions.

Slipp began drawing his cutlass, then thought better of it, blew a snort

of exasperation, and glared at Blaggut.

“Why did yer ave tgo an find this wisemouth? Why didnt yer just bring back vittles like I told yer to? he growled.

Blaggut stroked his new friends head fondly. “E dont mean nothm, Capn. You leave the liddle tyke tme; I wager we kin chat like ole messmates. Avast,eres the molemaid back wid vittles.

Furrtil ambled up and emptied her apron. Two apples, some wild plums, and a small pile of blackberries tumbled out. The searats began wolfing down the fruit.

“Tsk tsk, youm maken eeselfs sick piggen et all daown, she chided them. “Chew ten toimes an swaller more slow. Ee Muther Mellus allus sayin that to Dibbuns.

Slipp spat out a plumstone. “Wots a Dibble? he asked.

“Hiur, usns Dibbuns, zurr, baint Diddles.

Blaggut polished an apple on his stomach, saying, “An where does Dibbuns live, in liddle tents like yonder one?

The mousebabe popped a blackberry into his friends mouth. “Norra tent, ony a blanket. We come from a habbey, name a Redwall, bigga place than this high. He held a tiny paw as far over his head as he could, to indicate the size of the Abbey.

Slipp whispered to Blaggut, “Find out where it is.

The mousebabe shook his head despairingly and pointed an accusing paw at Slipp. “No whisprin, sbad manners. We take you to Redwall inna morain, if we cn find it.

An hour later the two Dibbuns were sound asleep in their tent. Slipp scoffed at Blaggut, who sat at the entrance watching them. “Ahoy, nurseymaid, dyew reckon theyll want a drink o water in the night?

The searat took off his tattered jerkin and carefully covered the two small creatures. “Aye, well, if they do, Capn, Ill get it for em!

Slipp tossed an apple core at Blaggut. “Well lookit yew, the bold searat, yew butterbrained brute. Ave ygone soft all of a sudden?

“Dont cost nothin t be nice to babes. Blaggut shrugged. “Mayap if somebeastd been nice to me when I was a liddle shrimp I wouldnt ave

growed up t be no searat, mightve been good an respectable. Who cn tell, Capn?

Slip leaped up and grabbed Blaggut by the throat. “You ave gone soft! he snarled. “Well lissen, softrat, when we gets ter this Redwall place there might be plunder an killin, so dont yew go soft on me then, or else yll feel my cutlass across yore gizzard. Do yhear?

Blaggut gulped and nodded. He knew only too well what his Captain was capable of. When there was loot to be had, murder and treachery became a mere formality to avaricious searats like Slipp. Blaggut took one last look at the two Dibbuns before settling himself down to sleep the tent entrance, hoping in his heart that the tiny pair so lost that they would not know the way back to Redwall Abbey on the morrow.

Sunrays filtered through the slitted windows of the tower room onto the besieged friends. Nagrus gray packed the narrow winding stairway outside, with the wolf exhorting them on to slaughter. “Come onenough of you! Hack that door to splinters and kill them off. Sourgall, you and Wetchops go and fetch a battering ram. Thatll speed things up!

The chamber was home to one piece of furniture, an old wooden bench. Meldrum and Dandin held it wedged against the door as a temporary measure. The old hare looked worried.

“Hear that? The blaggards have gone tget a batterin ram. Theyll smash this door tsmithereens! Look out!

Dandin hopped to one side at Meldrums warning, as a spear plowed through the damaged woodwork, protruding almost half its length. Nipping in smartly, Mariel grabbed the haft and tugged the weapon through, then began jabbing through the slits in the door at the enemy outside.

“If Ive got to go, Im taking a few with me! she shouted.

Gael Squirrelking stared despairingly round the small tower chamber. “Theres nowhere else for us to go. Once theyre through that door, were finished!

The red-backed shrike Glokkpod had been hopping about excitedly, waiting to give good account of himself when the rats came through the door. At Gaels announcement he ceased his dance, flicking hither and thither with his head as he searched for an avenue of escape.

“Good littil nest uppa thirr! he croaked.

Gael followed the shrikes eyes upward. “Of course! he cried out. “This is a tower with a pointed top; theres a small cone-shaped attic up there!

Meldrum the Magnificent grabbed the crosshilts of a long pike that came thrusting through the door, wrenching it forcibly from its owner. “Any port in a storm, wot? Lets give it a try!

It was a simple cross-planked ceiling, resting on thick wooden beams. Using the butt of the pike, the hare soon knocked two of the center planks loose. “Cmon birdie, do your stuff; up there an push those planks tone side! he shouted.

There came a cry from Nagru out on the stairway. “Out the way, you four. Get on that battering ram with Sourgall an Wetchops! Give them space there!

Anxiously, Mariel watched Glokkpod flap awkwardly upward. “Hurry, birdtheres not a moment to lose. Theyre going to start battering the door!

The shrike shoved and pulled until he had moved one plank aside. Wedging himself in the narrow space he had created, Glokkpod used both talons and beak to shift the other ceiling plank. Suddenly it shot aside with a clatter, and he disappeared through the opening, cackling, “Kchakcha, eazy, wassa eazy, good nest uppa hirr!

Meldrum shot an irate glance at the attic. “Glad youve found yourself a good nest, old chap. Now dyou mind oppin down here an helpin out?

Surprisingly the shrike did hop down. Flashing his bright savage eyes at the hare, he demanded, “Wharra it, longirrz?

“I say, less of the longears. See if ycan help our ids up into the attic, mattressback!

The shrikes feathers bristled dangerously as he glared Meldrum. “Donta call Glokkpod mattrissback! With a boom and a crack the battering ram struck the door, sending splinters flying. Mariel placed herself between Meldrum and Glokkpod. “Are you two going to stand here insulting each other, she said, her voice tight with anger, “or do you feel like helping out around here before were all killed?

The shrike made a circular movement with his beak, saying “Uppa thirr, leave thizz ta me!

The ram thudded against the door a second time. Meldrum took the now-useless bench and, laying it ladder-fashion against the wall, he scrambled ponderously up into the attic. Leaning out, Meldrum thrust both paws down to assist the other three. Helped by Dandin and Mariel, Gael climbed quickly into the small conical room.

The ram struck the door a third time, creating a gaping hole at its center. Backing out of spear-thrust range, the great red-backed shrike stood in full view of the rats outside. Glokkpods mad eyes shone with joy as he gave vent to his battle cry.

“Kachakachakiiirrrrr! Hirrs a butcha bird, ratzz!

There was an immediate scramble as the horderats retreated from the door at the sight of the Butcher Bird. Nagru was almost knocked flat. He pulled himself upright, raking wildly with his metal wolfclaws, and screaming, “Charge the door, or Ill flay you alive. Charge!

Urged on by the claws of Nagru, they rushed the door. Riveneye kicked aside the loose door timbers; swinging a sword, he rushed into the tower room. Death was on him in a blur of feathers, talons, and stabbing beak. Nagru pushed two more rats through immediatelythey were slain before they had time to draw breath. Glokkpods talons rattled against the floor as he spread his pinion feathers in a war dance. One wing had been badly torn by a rats spear, and several feathers were missing. Glo-kkpod was infuriated by this injury.

“Kirrchakkachirrr izza good day to fearrrrr me!

Silvamord pushed her way through the rats on the spiral staircase. She whirled on Nagru, berating him. “Fool! Cant you see that bird can hold the doorway as long as it likes while you send in hordebeasts a few at a time?

“Well, theres the Butcher Bird, my dear, said the Foxwolf, his voice dripping condescension. “Whats your bright idea?

Ignoring his patronizing tones, Silvamord gave her orders: “Back out of sight, all of you. Hooktail, pick out ten good archers, get on the third and fourth steps down, and keep firing heavy volleys until youve made a pincushion of that bird!

The friends in the attic had heard Silvamords commands. Mariel

called out urgently to Glokkpod, “Quickly, fly up here before they start shooting!

But the shrike continued his dance, challenging the rats. “Kirrchakachirrr! Glokkpod fear no ratzz!

“Its no good talking to that one. Dandin sighed wearily. “Hes going to get himself killed. Save your breath.

Meldrum solved the problem with a few barbed insults. “I say there, ygreat flyin featherbed, dyou keep your brains in your beak or your bottom, nestnoddle!

With a lurch and a flapping leap the shrike was up in the attic with them, standing eye-to-eye with Meldrum. Quickly, Mariel and Dandin slammed the attic floorboards back in place. Not a second too soonthe planking quivered to the thud of arrows.

“Hullo, thats a bit much, Meldrum called out to them moodily, “leavin a chap in the dark with a bally Butcher Bird. Shed a bit o light on the subject, someone. jits pitch black in here!

Dandin had brought a spear up with him. Using the itt he knocked a few of the rooftiles aside, dodging as they fell in. Sunlight streamed in, flooding the attic. Mar-rfel looked around at their reftige. It was the inside of a conically tiled towertop and through the broken roof she could see a tiny flagpole flying a gaily colored pennant.

The commanding voice of a rat sounded from the room below. “My Lord and Master, Urgan Nagru, King of all Southsward, Foxwolf Supreme and his Queen Silvamord send this message to you! Be it known that if you surrender yourselves to his mercy, the Urgan Nagru will spare your lives, all save that of the Butcher Birdthe creature is too dangerous to live. Hear this and know these are the words of the Urgan Nagru, all powerful in battle and ruler of all he sees!

Hefting one of the red pottery rooftiles, Meldrum shifted aside a floorplank. He flung the tile accurately, laying the rat low.

“ All merciful* indeed. Poppycock! Did yhear that, Glokko?

The shrike bowed, deferentially. “Nize shot, Meld-erin!

“Oh I dunno, you couldve probly done as well yself, old lad. The hare shrugged modestly. “By the way, its Mel-drum, as in boom boom. Drum!

The shrike nodded understandingly. “Derrin, bum bum, like in drim!

Gael stared up at the cloudless patch of blue sky that could be seen through the hole in the roof. “Well, were free in a way I suppose, he said, “free to stay up here and starve until the Foxwolf and Silvamord find a way of winkling us out and killing us all.

Mariel removed a few more tiles until she could see farther outside. “If we could only find a way of getting down there, she mused.

Meldrum took a peek and covered his eyes. “Great seasons, it makes me go all of a dither just thinkin about it Now I know why birds always look dizzy!

“Birds, theres a bird here, he could do it! They all turned to look at the Squirrelking, pointing at Glokkpod as if seeing him for the first time. “Theres the bird! : Dandin shook his head, totally nonplussed. “But what use is Glokkpod to us?

V Gael was shaking with excitement, “Maybe he cant fly us down with that injured wing, but he can go and get help for us! He can find the otters; theyll be able to help us!

Silvamord had tired of watching Nagru commanding archers to shoot ceaseless arrows into the tower room ceiling. She wandered off to her chamber, which was on the floor as the banqueting room. There she sat discussing the situation with Sicant, a female horderat who doubled as the vixens maid. They took wine and a sted fish together, and Sicant was careful to agree with Silvamords views.

“Youre right, of course, my Lady. Sooner or later escaped prisoners will be starved down from there.

Silvamord tapped her chin knowingly. “Malebeasts, fre all the same, not happy unless theyre fighting, will keep those archers firing arrows into the ceiling, and for what? A waste of arrows, thats all. Now as me, I prefer to fight when the time is right. Its brains win in the end.

She smiled as a paw rapped gently on the door. “Watch Ill show you what I mean, Sicant. Come in!

A small, furtive-looking rat stole into the room and 1, saying, “Majesty, you were right. The Butcher

# 17

Bird flew off a short while ago. It headed north and east slightly. I watched until it was out of sight.

Pouring a beaker of wine, the vixen pushed it toward the rat. “You did well, Bluebane. Go now and say nothing of this to anybeast. Taking the beaker of wine with him, Bluebane slunk away.

The vixen turned to Sicant. “Your mate, Graywort, hes willing to serve me?

Sicant nodded eagerly. “To the death, my Lady. He is like me; he knows that you are the real power on the throne of Southsward.

Silvamord took a dainty sip of wine. “Good! Riveneye was slain today, and we need a new horde Captain. Ill see that Graywort is promoted. Now, tell him to post six lookouts around the castle and keep one full squad in readiness night and day. The Butcher Bird is bound to bring help for the prisoners in the tower attic. When the lookouts spot them coming, tell them to report to your Graywort. As soon as he hears that help is arriving he must come directly to me and no other. Is that understood?

Sicant knelt and kissed the vixens paw gratefully. “I understand, Majesty.

A small mole almost bowled Furpp over as he dashed into the mole dwelling. The old fellow kept himself upright by catching hold of the youngster and said, “Yurr Bruggit, whurr be ee astenin off to?

Bruggit saluted the oldster hurriedly. “Zurr, thurr be a gurt burd out yon, eem be a-callen sumthen fearful furr ee otter an maister Bowly!

Furpp took Bruggit outside. “Naow, whurr be ee burd?

Bruggit tugged on Furpps digging claw. “Oer this way, zurr. Youm can ear im, “earken!

Furpp listened carefully. On the mid-morning air the sounds of Glokkpod came drifting clearly over a dune.

“Kcha kcha! Irriz otter, Bowly Pintip, whirr are yirr?

The Butcher Bird hove into view over the hilltop, walking with his customary swagger as he called out the names.

Furpp had seen Butcher Birds before. Carefully stowing Bruggit behind him, out of the birds view, he called, “A women to ee, zurr burd. Whurr cum ye frum?

The shrike cocked a bright eye toward the mole. “I, Glokkpod, come from Miriel and Dindin, Meldrin and Squirrelking, they say find otters.

“Burr, youm foller an oill take ee to otterfolk, said Furpp, turning toward his dwelling. “Usll feed ee, too, ifn youm promise not to go an eaten of uz.

There were mixed emotions inside the cavernous mole dwelling. The Squirrelqueen and her little son were overjoyed at the news that Gael was still alive. However, the feeling swiftly changed to one of anxiety when they were told of the peril that Gael and their friends were in. Iris soon took command of the meeting.

“Well go to Castle Floret tonight, as soon as it gets close to dark. If they havent been recaptured well see whats the best way to get them out of there. Glokkpod, how long do you think they can hold out?

The Butcher Bird was hastily gobbling cold turnipnta-ter pie, and he shrugged as he explained between beak-fuls, “Dont know, mibbee long time, mibbee not so long. Lotsa ratz, lotsa weapinz!

Bowly Pintips, who had placed himself in command of the four leverets, hefted his two hard scones. “Rats dont bother us, we be warriors!

Glokkpod choked on a piece of pie as he laughed. “Kchakcha kcha! Yirr only infints! The young hedgehog ignored the gibe, but the leverets were indignant.

“Steady on there an have a care, sir!

“Aye, you wouldnt like to tangle with these infants!

“Infants, indeed. Infant yself, sir!

“Great feathered windbag!

The shrikes bright eye rested on Foghill, the last one to speak. “Meldrin yirr father?

Foghill treated the question with the contempt he thought it deserved. “Tchah, old Uncle Mel my pater? I should think not!

Iris ignored the interchange as she started arrangements. “Troutlad, Greenbeck, get the others together. Wed best start out now. Bring all the ropes you can find.

Bowly insisted that he and the hares go along, too. Iris refused flatly but softened the blow by telling him that he and the hares should stay behind to protect the Squirrel-queen and her young one.

Firgan was a big, tough rat; he patrolled silently around fV. the east side of Castle Floret, as Graywort had told him If, to. Confidently he strode the valley floor, poking and Is prodding at bushes with his spear. It was early evening, f still light, when Firgan sat down to take his food. Tilting a flask of water the rat drank deeply, unaware of the huge f paws that came silently from behind his neck. He managed one startled gurgle before the flask slipped from his lifeless claws. The huge paws receded, accompanied by cracking snap as the broken spear was tossed carelessly aside into the bushes.

On the south side another of the rat patrol heard a noise fbehind a nearby rock. Padding stealthily forward he went to investigate, a long curved sword held ready. A large stone hit him at the base of his skullhe fell pole-by the missile. A smaller, sleeker pair of paws took sword and, wedging it between two rocks, they ped the blade effortlessly.

Night was starting to set in when Silvamord grew impatient. She snarled at Sicant, “There should be some news by now of rescuers coming. Whats Gray wort doing out there, dreaming?

The female horderat went to the door and looked out. “Here he comes, my Lady, she said, relieved.

Graywort entered the chamber carrying a ruined pike and a snapped sword. He was frightened, breathless, glancing back over his shoulder as if he were being followed. “MLady, theyre dead, Firgan, Gringol, and the rest of them, slain!

Silvamord sprang up, knocking the useless weapons from the horderats dithering paws. “Stop babbling and talk sense, you fool! Here, sit down, drink this and pull yourself together!

Elderberry wine slopped down Grayworts chin as he drank greedily. Having finished, he told his story.

“I posted the six guards, just as you commanded, told them twatch for a party of otters. Later I went out to see if they had anything to report …

Silvamord leaned closer, staring hard at Graywort. “And?

“Majesty, they were all dead, the six of them! First I found Gringolhis neck had been snapped like a twig! Look at this pike; its shattered, broken in two places. What sort of wild beast had the strength to do that? Then I ran to find the others. They were either killed by sling-stones or their necks had been busted like Gringol and Firgans. I heard a noise in the bushes, a rumble and growling, and I ran for my life. Somebeast was tryin to track me downI never stopped to look back, just dashed straight into the castle!

The vixen hastily armed herself from a wall cupboard, buckling on a sword and grabbing a bow and arrows. “Wheres that special squad I told you to have standing by? Get them up on their paws! Ill find out what sort of beast is at the bottom of all this!

Meldrum leaped to one side as a pikehead came smashing through the floorboards. Gael had taken to sitting on the upper beams where the rooftiles had been removed and staring down at the steadily deteriorating floor, and the arrowheads, spearblades, pikeshafts, and swords that were reducing it to splinters. Dandin tapped the Squirrelkings paw lightly.

“Move over, Sire. Im coming up there with you, its safer! Mariel followed suit shortly, then between them they hauled Meldrum up to the relative safety of the sloping roof.

Meldrum pulled a tile loose and aimed it between a rift in the floorboards. “Take that, yblighters! He was rewarded by the sound of an agonized rat squeal.

Mariel watched gathering cloud masses being swept in from westward, and she groaned, “Oh no, rain. Thats all we need! Still, I suppose itll provide us with a drink. No sign of Glokkpod yet?

Dandin scoured the sky to the north. “No. I wish hed hurry up. Dyou suppose hes found the otters yet? He could be completely lost.

“Wouldnt surprise me, Meldrum the Magnificent snorted. “Ill wager the rogues flown off someplace to fill his stomach. Never met any Butcher Birds before, but if thatn is a specimen, then theyre a pretty shabby lot, if yask me.

Nagru stood in the doorway of the tower room, out of the range of rooftiles. The Foxwolf was confident that he would recapture his prisoners. “Wetchops, Ragfen, keep *em stabbing upward. That ceiling wont last much longer, then we can bring them down with arrows. Dont kill them; just wound them a mite. I want our friends alive for a bit of fun.

Bluebane came scurrying up the stairs and tugged at Urgans wolfhide. The Foxwolf smiled. “Ah, my little eyes and ears, what is your lovely Queen up to now that I should know about?

They held a short, whispered conversation together. Nagru patted his informants back, saying, “Well done, Bluebane. Now go and find Graywort. Tell him I want to see him up here, right away.

Bluebane stood on the lower stair as if waiting for something. Nagru looked at him curiously. “What are you waiting for, my little spy?

Bluebane fidgeted with his tattered tunic. “Sire, Queen Silvamord rewarded me with a beaker of elderberry wine, see.

The Foxwolf smiled understandingly. “Ah, I Youd like a reward from me too, is that it?

The spy nodded eagerly. Nagru spoke softly, dangerously.

“Life is the highest reward of all, my friend. Double dealers and traitors often receive death as their payment. But I will not slay you for your treachery to me and my QueenI give you your life as a reward. You are spared. Now go and do my bidding. Without another word, Bluebane sped gratefully away.

# 18

It was late afternoon. Rain began falling in large spots, slowly at first, then it gathered force into a major downpour. On a wooded slope of Castle Florets valley a score of otters threaded their way through the undergrowth. The quick eyes of Greenbeck picked up a movement close by; a sharp wave of his paw sent Iris and the rest of the troop into a crouch, wary and silent. They held their breath, watching keenly as Silvamord and her horderats tramped by, hardly a pawlength from them.

When they had passed, Troutlad stood up hefting a javelin.

Iris pulled him down, saying, “Not yet. We dont want them to know were here, and besides, we dont know if theres more of em patrolling. Wheres the Butcher Bird?

Glokkpod poked his head out of a wet swathe of feathers. “Hirr I am. Glokkpod not like thiz ryne!

Iris blew rainwater from her muzzle enjoyably. “Noth-ing wrong with a bit of clean rain! Now, show me the tower our friends are trapped in.

Not being airborne, it took the shrike a little while to find the exact location. The otter troop hid among the trees as Glokkpod pointed his beak upward at the highest point of Floret, crying, “Thirr, up thirr they are.

Iris looked up. From where she was, the tower was a mere pinpoint, almost invisible in the rain. “Butcher Bird, fly up there and tell our friends weve arrived, she said. “Ask them what they want us to do. It looks impossible to help anybeast trapped that high up.

The four escaped prisoners were sitting out on the roof-beams, openmouthed as they caught raindrops to drink. Glokkpod landed alongside them; settling himself on a beam, he stared down at the weapons chopping through the splintered floor of the attic. “Ratz gonna gitcha soon if you notta scape hirr.

Mariel wiped a paw across her mouth. “Youre here at last! Have you brought help?

The shrike dipped his beak toward the valley floor. “Down thirr,

otters, Irriz say how they gonna help, what-cha want them to do?

“Hmph! Shouldve thought that was jolly obvious, said Me 1 drum, twitching his ears in annoyance. “A whacking great long ropell do the trick, wot!

“Kchakcha kcha! No rope that big, longirrs!

The hare shot the Butcher Bird a murderous glance. “Ive warned you once about calling me longears, you great puffed-up windbag! But he was speaking to empty space; the shrike had flown down to the otters.

Greenbeck shook his head. “A long rope, mate? Theres never been a rope that long in the history of seasons. What dyou think, Iris?

The female otter leader moved this way and that, viewing the castle from different angles. “Youre right. Theres no such thing as a rope that long, but I think they could do it with a shorter rope. Greenbeck, what dyou think of this as an idea ...

All four prisoners were now ripping tiles from the roof and hurling them through the sizeable hole that horde-beast weapons had created in the attic floor. Their attack was so ferocious it had driven the rats from the tower room out onto the spiral staircase. Even Gael Squirrelking was throwing tiles with every ounce of strength he could muster. Dandin took his time, waiting until he could see a venturesome rat poke its head into view before he hurled a tile.

“Well only keep them at bay for as long as these tiles last, then Nagru will send his archers in to pick us off, be said.

Mariel struggled to loosen a tile from a crossbeam. “Thats true, make each shot count. Glokkpod, what news?

The Butcher Bird landed almost sideways, gripping the small flagpole at the apex of the tower.

“Lissin tthiz silly ideaits yirr only hope. He explained Iriss scheme to them. Meldrum looked positively crestfallen at the wild notion.

“Let me get this straight, you chaps. The otters can us a rope up thats not very long. Right, then we ible it over a beam and one of us swarms down it andSwings to and fro until he can reach the battlements, at end of the west wall. He lands on the battlements, n one by one the rest of us shimmy down the blinkin rope an swing like bloomin pendulums until were all on the bally battlements.

Dandin continued, “Then we loose the rope, hitch it round the battlement and swarm down into the moat, out of the moat and climb down the rest of the plateau. Sounds dangerous, but Ill risk it! What about you, Meld-rum?

“Outbloominrageous! Fiddlesticks, totally impossible!

Glokkpod sneered at the hare. “You frightinned, long-irrs?

The old hare flung a tile, which took another rat out of commission. “Frightened? Id be an idiot not t be, you befeathered buffoon, but its the only way, so Meldrum Fallowthora will do it, frightened or not, sir!

Sourgall trotted down the stairs on Nagrus orders to where Graywort was waiting nervously.

“Foxwolf says hell see yer now.

Graywort followed Sourgall, probing nervously. “Did he say what he wants me for, mate?

Sourgall shrugged. “Dunno, but youll soon find out.

The Urgan Nagru smiled at Graywort cordially as he ushered him forward. “Ive been hearing good reports about you, rat. Been out helping Queen Silvamord search for intruders, have you?

Graywort was slightly bewildered but happy that he was receiving complimentary attention from the horde leader. “I was just about to, Sire, when Bluebane said you wanted to see me. Is there any service I can perform for you?

Nagru stopped him two stairs short of the tower room.

“On the contrary, Silvamord tells me that you are a good trustworthy beast capable of giving orders. Of course you heard what happened to poor Riveneye. Hes dead, unfortunately, my best Captain. So, theres a small service I can perform for you, my friend. Im promoting you to Captain in Riveneyes place.

Gray worts chest swelled, and he trembled with delight. “Thank you, Sire. I am yours to command!

Nagrus smile widened. “Well, that is nice to know. Jtfay I give you your first command now ... Captain Graywort?

The newly promoted Captain threw an extra-smart salute. “Id be proud to carry out your orders, Sire!

Nagru retreated one step, his smile practically extending to the wolfskull perched on top of his head. “Right. Go and tell those escaped prisoners that its useless to ; resist, they must surrender immediately.

The Foxwolf turned his back on Graywort, who strode smartly off into the very center of the tower room. Standing amid the wreckage of fallen rats and broken tiles, he glanced about nervously. Then, summoning up his courage, he coughed and called out in officious tones, “I am Captain Graywort of Urgan Nagrus horde, and I order you to come down from there and surr

Grayworts voice was cut off abruptly, as was his existence, by four well-aimed tiles.

Nagru sat upon the stairs, changing his smile to an expression of heartfelt pity. “Sourgall, he said, “is it still raining heavily?

“Yes, Sire. It shows no sign of slackening.

“Hmm, I think well leave the prisoners to soak until morning. Im getting tired. Mount a guard on these stairs, will you? Oh, and when youve done that would you be so kind as to convey some sad news to Queen Silvamord?

“Aye, Sire. What shall I say?

“Tell her that our brave new Captain Graywort was cruelly slain by the escaped prisoners. Youll do that for me, wont you? I cant stand being the bearer of sad tidings.

Silvamord was at that moment regretting her decision to venture outside Castle Floret into the downpour of a rapidly darkening evening. The squad of horderats was diminished by four, and some beast, or beasts, were stalking her and the patrol through the rising mists that curtaining rain was releasing from the warm ground. The vixen could not see her assailants, and she was rapidly of the opinion that she did not want to see them. Her one desire now was to get back inside the safety of Florets walls. To save losing face in front of her command, she ranted at them, “Stop pushing from behind there. Whats the matter with you? Frightened of a bit of rain and mist?

Beside her a rat gurgled and fell, transfixed by an arrow. She dodged behind a tree, calling out to the rat Fillch, “Wheres Graywort? Why isnt he here?

She jumped, startled as Fillchs voice came close to her ear. “I dunno, mLady. Gone off to see the Urgan Nagru, I think.

“You think? Who said he could? I never did. Whos second in command to Graywort?

Fillch knew what was coming, but he answered truthfully. “I am yMajesty. Dyou want tgo back to the castle now?

“Well of course I do, oaf! Silvamords voice was shrill with fear and frustration. “Didnt you hear me give the order to return? I cant see a thing with all this mist and rain; well be picked off one by one if we dont move.

Fillchs voice held a note of justifiable complaint in it. “But you was shoutin that order to Graywort, not me!

The vixen kicked out savagely, relishing the squeal of pain that issued from Fillch. “I didnt know Graywort was not here then, idiot. Why didnt you tell me at the time. Youre useless!

But Fillch was not answering. Silvamord turned on him, only to find the horderat pinned to the tree, slain by a barbed shaft from out of the misty deluge. Any vestige of boldness or courage deserted the vixen then, and she turned and ran headlong for the castle.

Her beaded skirt of tails swished wetly against her as, gasping for breath, she pounded onto the woodwork of the lowered drawbridge. Urging one another, the horderats plowed up the steps to the plateau after her.

“Inside, come on, move yourselves. Get inside!

The last rats hurried past Silvamord as Sourgall ran out, holding a scrap of sacking over his head to keep dry. “Majesty, I have a report from Urgan Nagru for you: he says that he regrets to tell you Captain Graywort ...

Silvamord did not hear the rest. She stood rigid, unable to tear her eyes away from the causeway steps up to the plateau. There, standing in a patch of pale watery moonlight, were two creatures returned from the dead.

Rab Streambattle and the badger Muta!

Moonlight glimmered whitely on the terrible scars and lacerations on the bare skin where new rur had not grown. She saw the otters paws rise as he stretched a shaft on his tautened bowstring, and acting instinctively, Silva-mord threw herself flat. Sourgall was still finishing his message as the arrow took his life.

Then Silvamord was dashing into Floret screaming, “Raise the drawbridge! Raise the drawbridge!

As the heavy wooden drawbridge creaked upward the vixen peered around the side of it at the plateau steps. Rab Streambattle and Muta were gone, vanished into the mist and rain like two wraiths out of a nightmare.

# 19

Finnbarr Galedeep drew his two swords as he watched the swarming masses approaching. Log-a-Log stood at his side, rapier at the ready, assessing the oncoming foe. “Giant marshtoads, big uns, there must be thousands of em! he yelled.

“Everybeast to the Pearl Queen, use her as a fort, well stand a better chance of fighting them off! shouted Jo-Iseph as he grabbed a long driftwood spar. It was a sensible idea, and the crew rushed to do his bidding. The shrew Patch pulled Rufe Brush away from iiihe memorial cairn, hurrying him along. “Cmon, mate. ;t Said Id look after you, didnt I?

Rufe found himself pushed aboard, and he took up his Iposition with Patch on the aft gallery of the crazily listed . “I dearly wish Rosie Woodsorrel was here, Patch, fee said. “She was as good as ten warriors!

Long green banners streamed out above the hordes of it marshtoads as they came on in their hundredsre, horrible, wart-studded creatures, armed with what appeared to be big curved scythe blades mounted on poles. Rufe swallowed hard, his paws trembling. “Ill wager they could inflict awful damage with those things. Dyou think theyll attack us, Patch?

The brave shrew tested the point of a boarding pike. “They aint here for a party, Rufe. You stick close tme!

Finnbarr grinned with anticipation. His lust for battle rising hotly, he spoke out of the side of his mouth to Joseph, “Well, it was nice knowin ye, Bellmaker. Lets go out with a bang. Dyou creatures ave a battle cry?

The toads were almost upon them as Joseph shouted out, “Give em a good roar, come on crewwheres our war shout?

Wild cries ripped from the throats of everybeast aboard: “Red wall! Redwall! Logalogalog! Red-waaaaallll!!!

The toads halted dead in their tracks.

An eerie silence fell over shore and cliff. Joseph looked quizzically at Finnbarr. “Great seasons of plenty! That seemed to do the tricklook at

em, youd think they were frozen!

The sea otter was stupefied for a moment, then his love of battle took over. Clashing his twin sword blades in the face of the massed toad army, he bellowed defiantly, “Whatre ye waitin for, ya blisterin mudsuckers? Eres the Galedeep, fightin fit an rarin tgo. Ill take on any number of ye, potbellied marshspawn, web-brained cowards! Do ye use those weapons fer eatin yore vittles or diggin oles to ide in?

Joseph restrained the impetuous sea otter. “Steady on there, Finnbarr, no use forcing a fight with this lot. Theres too many of em; wed be slaughtered. Lets wait and see what they do next.

The marshtoads raised their weapons and began chanting: “Glogalog! Hoolya, hugg hugg! Glogalog!

The massed ranks parted, leaving a long aisle. From the foot of the cliffs came a procession of toads carrying a canopied hammock on a wooden frame. Lying in the hammock was a massive old toad, far bigger than all the others. Across his stupendous stomach rested a bulrush scepter with a sun-bleached lizard skull fixed to its top.

Patch nudged Rufe, whispering, “Looks like the big boss wants to visit us.

The bearers let the framed hammock rest on the sand. The marshtoad ruler pointed to himself and uttered a guttural sound. “Glogalog, Bulgum Glogalog!

“What dyou think hes saying? Joseph murmured to Finnbarr.

The shrew Chieftain came to stand with them. “I think hes telling us his name, Glogalog. Sounds very like mine, Log-a-Log.

The marshtoad pointed to himself again. “Glogalog, Bulgum! Bulgum!

The vast army of marshtoads bowed low, their voices almost a moan as they chorused, “Bulgum! Bul-guuuuummmmm!

Finnbarr sheathed his swords, “What dyer suppose a Bulgum is, mates? he said.

A familiar earsplitting laugh rent the air. “Whooha-hahooh! I say, you chaps, dyou need a jolly old interpreter, wot?

Patch had to restrain Rufe from leaping over the stern. “Its Rosie an

Duny, he yelled. “Theyre not dead! Oh look, Patch! Rosie an Durry, theyre alive!

The Hon Rosie Woodsorrel and Duny Quill stepped from behind the canopied frame and waved merrily to their friends aboard the Pearl Queen. Both looked none the worse for their ordeal of being lost at sea. A great gasp of delight and astonishment came from the animals massed on the deck. Rosie and Durry crossed the sand, while the toads stood watching silently. They reached the ship, and dozens of hands leaned out to help them on board. Rufe threw himself happily on Durry.

“What the ... ? How did ... ? spluttered the Bell-maker.

Rosie gave Joseph a huge wink. “Toodle pip, old sportlisten carefully an dont ask silly questions. Young Durry an mself have got to keep up our image as Bulgums, sort of greatbeasts who come flyin out of the sky an all that. Have you got any of that absolutely foul seaweed grog that those searats left aboard?

Log-a-Log scratched his head in bewilderment. “Theres jugs an jugs of it in the galley. Why?

“Never mind why, old thing. Just go and get a jug, please.

While Log-a-Log went to the galley Durry and Rufe carried on hugging each other. The young squirrel seemed lost for words; all he could do was weep. Durry hugged him tighter. “There, there now, Rufey, dont you cry no more, Im back!

Patch could not help chuckling. “Hed probly weep a lot less if you didnt ug so tight, matey. The pore beast gets spiked worse every time ydo!

Durry immediately let go, and Rufe giggled helplessly as he pulled hedgehog spines from his paws. “Oh hahaheehee, Ill never let you out of my sight hahaheehee again, Duny Quill. Hahaheehee!

Patch and Durry joined in the laughter, three friends together. Log-a-Log had returned with a jug of seaweed grog, and Rosie took it from him.

“Come on, young Quill, stop that laffin an conduct yself like a proper Bulgum. Leave those two a moment, theyll still be here when yget back. Weve got a bit of magic to do for old Glogalog.

Log-a-Log gave Rosie a skeptical look. “Can you really understand the marshtoad language?1

Hon Rosie jumped down to the sand, carefully catching the jug of grog as Durry lowered it to her. “I spose so, though not all of it, just the main bits, she said. “A Bulgum is a high-up sort of chap, chief or magician, that kind of rot, and Glogalog is the podgy feller in the hammock. Hes the King of all marshtoads; we saved his lifebut Ill tell ymore about that later. Oh, by the way, Id change my name if I were you, just for the time were here. The mighty King wouldnt like havin somebeast around with a name that sounded too much like his. Well cheerio, see you later, Glug a Bag!

The shrew Chieftain looked at her indignantly. “Glug a Bag?

The breakfast fire was reduced to a few smoldering twigs and ashes. Glogalog and the marshtoads formed a circle around it. Rosie instructed Durry as to what they should do, and the performance began. As the hare and the hedgehog went into a wild dance, jigging and prancing madly, the toad circle moved back to give them more space. At intervals Rosie and Durry would point to each other and shout out in deep impressive voices, “Bulgum hoolya hugg hugg Bulgum!

Still cavorting crazily, they passed the jug of seaweed grog, each taking a quantity and holding it in their mouths. Rosies ears stood up stiffthat was the signal.

Ppphhhssssstt!

Durry and Rosie squirted the grog from their mouths over the smoldering ashes of the breakfast fire.

Whoof! Red and blue flames shot up high, as the embers ignited by the grog took fresh light. All the marsh-toads, even Glogalog, fell flat on their faces in the sand, moaning, “Bulgum, Bulguuummmm!

Pulling a wry face, Durry spat out again. “Pthooey! Orrible stuff. My ole nuncle Gabe wouldve had it all buried in a hole far out in the woodlands!

Rosie pointed to the prostrate toad masses. “Whoo-hahahooh! Twas worth it though, Durry. Were a right old pair of Bulgums now, and no mistake!

With the threat of a marshtoad invasion now gone, the crew set about

making a ceremonial lunch aboard the Pearl Queen, with Glogalog and several of his lieutenants as guests. Food was prepared and spread on the hatch covers. The Guosim cooks did it up proud: October ale, heavy fruitcake, hot plum scones, mint tea, and a superb apple and blackberry flan. While Rosie held disjointed conversations with the marshtoad King, Durry related their strange story to the crew.

“When the mast broke off in the storm, me and Rosie hung on to it like limpets, and we were swept off by the winds, high up in the sky. I was never more frightened in me life, but Rosie there, she laughed an laughed fit to bust. Up an* up we went, whirlin an* twirlin, drenched through by the rain an clingin on for dear life. Next thing I knew the wind dropped an so did we, straight out the sky like an arrow, down! We landed on the far side of yonder cliffs in a great swamp, an guess what? That mast came down smack on the skull of a fearful great hissin adder, a serpent! It was just about to make supper of King Glogalog when men Mrs. Rosie an the mast landed on its ead, whacko!

Joseph selected a slab of heavy fruitcake. “So thats how you became a Bulgum, eh Durry, by saving Gloga-logs life? But how did you figure out the language?

“I never, that was Rosie, Durry shrugged, sipping his October ale. “It werent two ticks before er an the King was Bulgummin an* Blogalogin an hoolyahoyin together. She picks things up very quick, yknowaint that right, Mrs. Rosie?

Hon Rosie Woodsorrel gave up ravaging the apple and blackberry flan momentarily. “Right you are: us Bulgum types are pretty sharp in the lingo business, wot? Woo-hahahooh!

King Glogalog winced and stuffed a webbed claw in one ear. When the laughter had subsided, he pointed to Rosie, saying, “Bulgum umutcha Glogalog, umutcha kug yettayur!

Rosie shook her head and pointed seaward. “Numutch Bulgum Glogalog, Bulgum yuggafurr yur yur!

Joseph put aside his fruit cake. “Whats going on, Rosie? he said. “I dont like his tone.

The hare translated. “It seems the old King gets a bit cheesed off bein the only Bulgum in this neck o the woods; he wants me to stay here forever as official Bulgum to the jolly old toads. But Ive just told him that this particular Bulgum has other plansIm sailin* off with you lot when weve patched the Pearl Queen up. Youll notice he doesnt look

too happy about it.

Glogalog shook his lizard-skull scepter at Rosie and the crew. “Yutcha slugg! Bulgum yuggafurr!

Rosie took a dainty sip of mint tea. “Says hell kill us all before hell let me sail away; Ive got to stay here forever. I say, this is all gettin a bit tiresome, wot? Very basic chaps, marshtoads.

“Look, Ill stay here as Bulgum if Glogalog lets you all sail away without any trouble, said Durry glumly.

Rufe picked up a jug of seaweed grog. “No you wont, mate. Come on, Rosie, Ill need an interpreter. Tell Glogalog to come with me to the galley. The fire is still lit thereIll teach him to be the greatest fire-raisin Bulgum these toads have ever seen!

# 20

Late that night Joseph took delivery of the broken foremast from a squad of toads who had lugged it back from the marshes to the Pearl Queen. Finnbarr had rigged a block and tackle to haul it aboard, and Joseph, Rosie and some others stood by with rope lashings, metal pins, wooden splints, and spars to fix the mast firm when it was hoisted. Durry and Rufe helped the Guosim to patch the hole in the forard lockerthe shrews were expert boat repairers and worked well under Log-a-Logs direction. With melted pitch, rope caulking, and planks, they soon had the gap sealed and the hull seaworthy again.

A fire had been built farther along the shore. Patch tended it carefully until it was reduced to glowing embers. Countless fireflies, trapped inside lanterns, glimmered and twinkled as the marshtoads surrounded the nearly extinct fire. Patch hailed the ship. “Ahoy, Pearl Queen, if this fire gets any lower, Glogalog wont be able to do his magic. Youd best fetch him now!

Rosie left the mast repair gang to supervise the loading of the King, together with ten jugs of seaweed grog, onto the framed hammock. Finnbarr nodded to her. “You an* Patch git back aboard sharpish, miz. The tides arisin an waits for nobeast.

Marshtoads moved aside to let the hammock be set down beside the fire. Glogalog grunted as they heaved him out of his comfortable bed. Rosie gave him a swig of seaweed grog; his bulging eyes popped out further as he held it without swallowing. Skipping around the edge of the circle Rosie began singing in a serious baritone voice, a song she had made up for the occasion.

“Stand back and watch this Bulgum toad,

Hes goin to do some magic,

But if young Rufe has taught him wrong,

It could turn out quite tragic.

Get back to the ship now, Patch,

Ill be right behind you,

Glogalog oh please dont sneeze,

Or they will never find you.

Careful when you spit that grog,

Dont stand near the venue,

Or youll end up crispy fried,

On the marshtoad menu!

With a twitch of her ears, Rosie signaled to Glogalog, who spat the grog over the embers, causing a sheet of flame to flare skyward. The marshtoads hopped about croaking with fright and excitement at their Kings magical skill. Glogalog took another swig and, swallowing half, he spat out the rest, causing another upburst of flame.

Rosie took advantage of the jubilant melee to make good her escape.

Smiling foolishly, Glogalog continued to swig great quantities of the lethal seaweed grog. Some he spat at the fire, but for the most part he was happy to guzzle the grog, now that he had a taste for it. Spraying and spitting the stuff at random, he soon had several marshtoads croaking in distress as they hurled wet sand on their smoldering webs and beat out threads of flame racing around their gills.

Pearl Queen righted herself on the incoming tide and bobbed in the water with her keel free of the sand. Joseph watched anxiously as the large rollers started to crash along the tide line, rapidly eating up the land. The breeze was springing up stiffly as he helped Durry and Rufe to haul their friend Patch aboard.

Finnbarr stood ready with a heaving line. “Wheres Rosie? We cant wait, even with slack sails! he shouted.

Out of the darkness Rosie made herself heard. “Whoo-hahahooh! Over here, chaps. Comin aboard, ahoy, an all that nautical nonsense!

The sea otter shot the line out to the long-limbed figure pounding through the surf toward his vessel. Rosie caught it with her usual accuracy and was soon pulled aboard. She lay on the deck chortling helplessly. “Whooha! Better pile on all sail, Finn. The way old Glogathing was performin back there, I think its all goin to end in tears. Whoohahahooh!

Directly after she had finished speaking, there was a loud bang from the shore, and sheets of flame shot up high into the night sky.

Finnbarr took Rosies advice quickly.

“Hoist all sail, mates, sharp now, jump to it, on to those yardarms an1 loose every stitch of canvas on *er!

By the light of following explosions, masses of angry marshtoads could be seen, hopping across the beach toward Pearl Queen. Having unfurled the sails, the crew took boarding pikes and any long timbers they could find and, pushing hard, they punted the vessel, trying their best to get her into deep water, away from the hordes of maddened toads speeding over the shore toward them.

Pearl Queen bobbed on the incoming waves, slow and stately, despite the frantic pushing of her crew. Rufe, Durry, and Patch sweated and struggled at the stem. Then there was a massive bang as the jugs of grog and the canopied hammock rose skyward in a searing column of flame. The three friends felt a blast of heat from the explosion. Marshtoads threw themselves flat across the sand and in the shallows of the tideline. Finnbarr slammed the tiller hard over, sending Pearl Queen listing perilously as she turned side on to the shore.

Rosie was propelled across the deck; she cannoned into the rail glaring at the sea otter. “I say, whatn the name of seasons are you up to? *

Finnbarr Galedeep kept an experienced eye on the sails. “You leave it to an able-bodied seabeast, marm. Were goin to run the rollers!

The toads had begun clambering up the stern now. Striking out with their long spars and pikes, the defenders knocked them off into the water. Other toads climbed on the heads of their floundering companions to leap at the ship.

The sea otter gave a triumphant shout. “Avast, cullies, ang on tight, were away!

A prolonged gust of wind howling down out of the north clouted Pearl Queens sails and she took off like a javelin. Bows lifting high, the great ship scudded free on the roller crests, speeding along parallel to the shore. Finnbarr played the tiller deftly, skipping her from one wavetop to the next, veering and tacking out to open sea in a dainty sidestepping dance.

Behind on the shore a scorched and blackened Glog-alog sat smoldering in helpless rage, watching his marsh-toads flopping helplessly in the waves, as the ship carrying his former Bulgums sailed off into the night. Struggling upright, he shook his scepter at the

receding vessel and croaked venomously, “Yurrg Golchukkum furgalumm Boolawugg! A combination of marshtoad curse and insult that would have caused any interpreter to blush deeply.

Dawn light reflected twinkling greengold across the restless waves. Finnbarr yawned aloud as he relinquished the tiller to Joseph. “I dont knows wot I want first, matey, a good sleep or a decent breakfast. Twas a long, ard night.

The Bellmaker shoved his sea otter friend playfully. “Get along with you, go on. Ill hold her head south. The shrews are making you a victory breakfast for sailing us out of that scrape last nightonly a Galedeep like yourself could have done it.

Finnbarr was instantly revived as he sniffed the delicious aromas wafting from the galley. Guosim shrews laid the food out on the hatch covers amidships; there was October ale, raspberry cordial, and hot mint tea, a plum and pear pudding, meadowcheese, and fresh farls of shrewbread, piping hot from the oven. Pearl Queens crew cheered their skipper until the summer morning air rang to their cries.

Finnbarr bowed modestly before launching himself at the food with a formidable appetite. “Fall to, messmates and elp an ole seadog to clear these vittles! Ahoy there, Foremole, wots that thing yore carryin?

“Oi found et, zurr. Twurr idden in ee forard cabin! Reverently the sea otter took the small melodeon that Foremole presented to him.

“Wallopin clamshells, tis me ole ottercordion, I thought it were tost. Wonder if she still works?

Twiddling his paws across the buttons, he expanded the instruments ribbed bellows, and it produced a melodic chord. Much to the delight of everybeast Finnbarr threw back his head and began singing a merry sea otter ditty. Durry, Rufe, and Patch stamped their paws on the deck rhythmically in time to the comic song. It was a happy release for them all after the perils they had endured, and Finnbarr could play as well as he could sing.

“Whoa there was an ole lobster who married a cod,

Boggle me barnacles, sail off tsea,

And tho* all the cockles an clams thought it odd,

Boggle me barnacles, over the brine,

I knows yer a codfish but darlin yore mine!

For a weddin brekkfist the pair ad to feed,

Boggle me barnacles, sail off t sea,

On rootybag cake an the best of seaweed,

Boggle me barnacles, over the brine,

I knows yer a lobster but I loves yer fine!

They was married offshore by a little fat whale,

Boggle me barnacles, sail off tsea,

An the guests drank barrels of deepwater ale,

Boggle me barnacles over the brine,

Pass me that flagon of green ocean wine!

The party went on til an hour before dark,

Boggle me barnacles, sail off tsea,

An they were ate up by an iggerant shark,

Boggle me barnacles over the brine,

A shark dont ave manners when hes out to dine!

Amid hoots of laughter and loud applause Finnbarr did an encore, with Rosie and Foremole dancing the parts of lobster and cod. They breakfasted until mid-morning, the weather being calm and the seas mild. Joseph lashed the tiller straight south. Having missed a full nights sleep, the entire crew lay about on the sun-warmed decks to take a few hours of much-needed rest.

In the heat of mid-noon Rufe woke parched. Bleary-eyed, he drew a dipper of water from the ships drinking cask and drank half, pouring the rest over his head to waken himself properly. Blinking water from his eyes, the young squirrel stared out over the gently swelling deep.

Finnbarr was wakened by Rufe shaking him. “Eh, wot time is it, mate? Musta been asleep alf o the day! Ru-feysomethin the matter, young un?

The squirrel tried to keep his voice calm. “Er, this morning, Mr. Finnbarr, you sang a song about cods an* lobsters being eaten up by a shark ...

The sea otter stretched luxuriously. “Aye, so I did Ru-fey. Dye want me to teach ye the words?

“No, sir. Id just like to know what a shark looks like. “Bless yer eart, matey, you dont sees much of em, an you dont wants to neither. Mainly all youll see is a great dark fin stickin up out o the water.

Rufe took the sea otters tattooed paw and led him to the rail. “Does it look like this one circling our ship, sir?

# 21

In the same noontide Tarquin L. Woodsorrel was beginning to get really worried. Since dawn he had headed a major search party in Mossflower Wood. Without stopping to rest or eat, they had combed copse and thicket alike with no successthe two Dibbuns were still missing. Brother Mallen poked fruitlessly at the undergrowth, his staff clacking against that of Sister Sage. He shook his head. “Im beginning to think this is a complete waste of time, Sage. Are there any deep swamps hereabouts?

The Sister dropped her staff. “Mallen, how could you even think that!

“Hearken, silence in the ranks there, somebeast comin! At Tarquins low warning the search party became still.

The pretty squirrel Treerose dropped from the boughs of an elm, directly in front of Tarquin. “Are you looking for two Dibbuns, a mouse and molemaid? she asked.

The hare perked up considerably. “Indeed we are, Treerose. Dyou know where the little blighters are at?

Treerose pointed east and slightly south. “Over that way. My Toms with them. Follow me.

Slipp and Blaggut did not like the look of Oak Tom. The big sturdy squirrel stood perched on a bough, an arrow notched meaningfully on his bowstring.

“Dibbuns, come over here to this tree, he ordered. “You rats, stay where you are or Ill let daylight into you. *

The pair did as they were told, though Slipp was figuring the odds of either seizing the Dibbuns as a shield, or attempting a rush attack on the stern squirrel. Blaggut heard the search party approaching and whispered, “Psst, Capn, theres more of em comin.

In a moment they were surrounded by Redwallers armed with stout ash staves. Slipp gave Blaggut a swift, vicious kick. “See wot youve got us into now? Leave the talkin tme.

Tarquin thought Slipp was talking to him and he leaned closer, asking, “Eh, whats that ysay?

The searat Captain put on his best oily smile. “Good noontide to ye sir. I ope yore not ere to rob onest travelers like us.

“Fiddlesticks, said the hare, waggling his ears indignantly. “The very idea of it ...Were Redwallers, sir. But more tthe point, where dyou think youre takin those two Dibbuns off to, eh?

The mousebabe avoided Sister Sages paws and piped up, “Wazzen taken us nowhere, huh! Me an* Furrtil was takin them to the hAbbey; theys losted, like us!

Sage was of the old-fashioned school. She caught the mousebabe by his ear, saying, “Whatve you been told? Dont interrupt your elders, even if they are searats!

Blaggut was unsure what the proper protocol was, so he held his coat edges and dropped an elaborate curtsey. “Dont be *ard on the liddle un, marm. Tis the truth es tellin yer. Bless their liddle paws, they was takin me an me mate ere back to Redwalls hAbbey. Were lost, yer see.

Sage was skeptical. “Lost? What are two searats doing this far inland?

Slipp adopted his look of injured dignity. “Beggin* yer pardon, marm, but were not searats. Ho no, my names Slipp an Im a cook. This “eres me mate Blaggut, an* es a, er, er, carpenter, aye, thats wot e is, a carpenter!

Tarquin took over from Sister Sage. “You still havent told us what youre doin round here.

Slipp wrung the tails of his coat in both claws, as if the tale was too harrowing for him to tell. “Well ysee, yer Lordship, were the only two beasts left alive from the wreck of the Muddy Duck, that was our ship. She was sunken by a storm an all our mates was drownded. Aint that right messmate? He gave Blaggut a sly kick.

“Oh, er, thats right, Capn, the searat stammered. “The ole Dirty Swan was lost at sea right enough. Theres ony me n the Capn left alive to tell the tale.

“Why does that one keep calling you Captain? said Brother Mallen, smartly relieving Slipp of his cutlass.

“Youll ave ter forgive ole Blaggy, sir. Es a bit slow in the ead. Capn is his nickname fer me. Slipp gave Blaggut a playful buffet, as hard as he could.

Mallen inspected the chipped cutlass blade. “One of you said your ship was the Muddy Duck, but the other said it was the Dirty Swan. Now which is it?

Both searats started contradicting each other. “The Muddy Swan, er, the Dirty Duck, er, the Mucky Dud, er, er, the Swanny Duck, the Dirty Mud ...

“You mean you cant remember the name of your own ship? Sage interrupted sharply.

Slipp collapsed to the ground, covering both eyes with his claws as he made weeping noises. “Its the shock an unger! O it was awful. Awful!

Blaggut produced a grubby kerchief and began comforting Slipp. “Dont go gittin upsetted now, Capn. Ere, blow yer snout an* youll feel better.

Blaggut performed a silent dance of agony as Slipp bit savagely on his paw. Tarquin separated them. “Steady on there, chaps, thats enough of that. Well, weve got our young uns back no worse for wear, an* I spose its you two weve got to thank. Spose youd better come back to the Abbey with us. Tom, Treerose, will you follow up the rear in case anybeast gets lost again? Tom, Treerose? But the two reclusive squirrels had vanished into the vast-nesses of Mossflower.

Supper that evening was served in Cavern Hole, a smaller, less-decorated venue than the Great Hall. Blind Simeon sat next to Mother Mellus. “So, Mellus, your two Dib-buns are back safe and sound, he said.

The badger nodded as she helped herself to blueberry tart and meadowcream. “Aye, a bowl of soup apiece, a sound scrubbing in the bath and sent off to bed straightaway, as an example to the others.

Simeon smiled as he poured her a beaker of maple cordial. “Little rascals. Dibbuns seem to live in a world of their own. I dont suppose they meant any real harm.

Saxtus peered over his spectacles across a summer salad. “I agree with Mellus: they must learn their lesson. Its lucky the two rats found them. What dyou make of those two?

Mellus stared hard at the pair who were bolting down everything in sight ravenously. “I dont like them or trust them. Cook and a carpenter indeedgot searat stamped all over their scurvy hides!

“Again I agree with you, my friend, said Saxtus as he broke a fresh oat farl to have with his salad, “but without them the little ones might have come to harm. They havent showed bad will to anybeast so far, and with that in mind we cannot refuse them the hospitality of Redwall. They must be treated as harmless lost travelers.

Simeon smiled broadly at Melluss answer. “Harmless lost travelers, my left footpaw!

Blaggut dug his spoon into a bowl of mixed fruits with honey. “This is the life, eh, Capn? he said as he shoveled it down with gusto. “These is the fanciest vittles I ever et in me life. Pass me that fizzy strawbrry stuff.

Slipp was forging hastily through a wedge of yellow cheese studded with beechnuts, but he could not resist a sarcastic dig at the former boatswain of the Pearl Queen. “Fanciest vittles you ever et, eh? Didnt they ave stuff like this at Blaggut Mansions?

Blaggut grabbed two hot blackberry scones from a passing tray. “Blaggut Mansions, wheres that? Pity they aint got no seaweed grog. Yowch! He jumped sharply as Slipps claws nipped his stomach.

The searat Captain saw Mellus watching them, so he pasted a smile on his face as he muttered threateningly, “Lissen, onionbonce, one more mention of seaweed grog an Ill rip yer nose off, see? Ifn they ears you blatherin on about seaweed grog, theyll know fer sure were sea-rats!

But Blaggut was enjoying himself. He bit deep into a plumcake, spraying crumbs across the table as he addressed Mellus, “Ahoy there, stripedog, wheres me two liddle mateys? You shoulda invited them to the party!

The old badger glared dangerously at him. “Theyre fast asleep in bed. And my name is not stripedog; its Mellus. Is that clear?

Blissfully unaware of the wrath he had nearly brought down on his own head, the searat answered, “Clear as a fat merchantship. Pleased tmeet yer, Mellers. My names Blaggut, but the Capn ere calls me fatead an lazypaws an baggybum an suchlike names. Hoho, es a one fer the names is the Capn! He was jolted by repeated kicks from Slipp beneath the table.

“Will you stow all that Capn, Capn! Yer an addle-nosed, bottlebrained, butterbellied barnacle!

Blaggut winced until the kicking stopped. “Aye aye, Capn! Ooh look, they got trifle, Capn!

The bad manners of the two searats were tolerated with great patience by most of the Redwallers, though Mellus and Sister Sage were forced to stifle stern comments when Abbot Saxtus looked reprovingly over his spectacle tops at them. Slipp and Blaggut continued grabbing and gorging, with scant regard to the other diners. After the meal most of the Abbey creatures took themselves off to the dormitories with sighs of relief. Brother Mallen was heard to murmur as he and Mellus helped to clear tables, “Huh, I suppose well have the pleasure of those two at breakfast tomorrow morning. If I had my way, Id sit them both outside the gate to share a trough!

The old badger nodded in agreement as she folded a cloth. “Theres no excuse for bad manners. I wish that Id had charge of those two rats when they were Dibbuns; Id have made them sit up straight and behave, indeed I would!

Moonlight beamed through the guest-room window, bathing the walls in a soft radiance. Warm summer night cast its drowsy spell over the Abbey, not a breeze stirred the leaves of the orchard, and peace lay over all. Slipp lay staring at the ceiling, listening to the silence and formulating plans in his mind. He was still fully dressed and in possession of a carving knife he had stolen from the table. In the next bed, Blaggut snuffled noisily, then turning onto his back he began to snore uproariously. Slipp flung a pillow which caught Blaggut in the face, enveloping his head. The former boatswain of Pearl Queen came awake, thrashing about as he was tangled by bedlinen.

“Whuhhh mainsails fallen, up the riggin, mates!

Rising hastily, Slipp tweaked his companions ear. “Stow that noise, ygreat oaf, youll wake everybeast!

Blaggut sat up scratching his head. “Wots up, Capn? You woke me out o the middle of a good oP sleep there.

Slipp looked contemptuously at his boatswains comical figure. “Get yerself out o that daft nightgown. Ylook like a jollyboat with a floppy sail. Do it quietly an keep yer voice down. Now listen tme, Ive got plans.

For the short time he had been acquainted with it, Blaggut liked his little truckle bed very much. As he dressed he sat on the edge of it, bouncing happily. Slipp, fast running out of patience, aimed a kick at

Blaggut, hissing,

“Will you keep still, bucketbelly. Im talkin tyou!

Blaggut pulled a face and continued bouncing. “I kin ear you, Capn. Hoho, this is the life; bettern some ole ammock or deckplank this bed is. I never ad me own liddle bed. If were goin to steal things, Im gonna pinch this an take it wid me when we go ... His voice trailed off as Slipp drew the carving knife menacingly.

“Lets git somethin straight: I didnt pick you tcome with me, but yore ere whether I like it or not. Im still Capn, though, an if yore not still an quiet rightaway Ill see to it that yore silenced fer good!

Miserably Blaggut stopped bouncing and listened to his Captains scheme.

“All this fancy vittles, nice rooms, an whatnot, stands to reason a place o this size must ave a great store of treasure idden away somewheres. Right?

Blaggut nodded dumbly as Slipp continued. “So we looks fer it by night an keeps our noses clean durin the day. Come on, foller me.

“Where are we goin, Capn?

“Where dyou think, clothead, pickin daisies? Were start!n our treasure search. Now come on, an stop callin me Capn!

“Righto, Capn, but whatll I call yer?

“Call me Slipp, thats me name.

“Righto, Caper, Slipp. Sounds funny, me callin you Slipp. Nice name, though, Slipp. I likes it. Righto, lets go, Slippy!

The carving knife pricked Blaggut* s nose as the irate Captain snarled at him, “Ill Slippy yerIll slip this blade between yer ribs if yer calls me that once more, understand?*

The The searats found a candle and lit it from a walltorch in Great Hall. They crept about searching the alcoves and crannies. “Whatre we searchin for, Capn? Blaggut whispered as Slipp lifted the edge of the great tapestry.

The Captain rapped lightly on the wall. “Some idden door or secret panel. Thats where Id stow me loot ifn I owned a place like this.

Blaggut held the candle up to the tapestry, illuminating the figure of Martin the Warrior. “Lookit this feller, Capn. I wouldnt like to cross swords with that mouse, looks a right tough un!

“Its only a picture, stupid. Old that light down ere.

They continued searching Great Hall without success. From there the two searats progressed to Cavern Hole and, again, they found nothing. Blaggut smelled food.

“No treasure ere, Capn. Lets try that place where the nice smells are comin from.

“What, you mean the kitchens? Who ides treasure in kitchens?

Blaggut shrugged. “I dunno, who does?

Slipp stared strangely at him in the candlelight. “May *ap you got somethin there. A good place to ide loot would be a place nobeastd think of looking fer it. Come on!

The kitchens were in darkness save for a dim, red glow from the ovens, and the candle cast a dancing light laced with flickering shadows. Nervously Blaggut grabbed a warm loaf from a baking tray and began munching on it.

“Blisterin barnacles! Slipp cursed softly as he scorched his paw on an oven door. He plunged the limb into what he imagined was a jar of water, only to find it was warm honey. As was customary with the searat Captain, he began blaming his boatswain. “Now see wot youve made me do. Gimme that candle! Snatching at the candle he knocked it from Blagguts paw, and the light went out. Slipp was searching the floor with sticky paws when his companion began hugging him tightly.

“Were bein watched, Capn. Look!

In the red ovens glow a black-caped figure swept silently by them. Both rats gave a gasp of horror. The mysterious shape paused a moment in the doorway; it appeared to be looking in their direction. Slipp and Blag-gut crouched paralyzed by nameless terror, then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the black-caped form was gone!

Blaggut leaped up with a strangled yelp, knocking the honey jar from its perchit smashed on the floorstones. Slipp was already up and pushing the boatswain to one side. He dashed off, tripped, and

crashed into a rack of pots and pans which clattered noisily to the floor. Both rats fled the kitchens, hearts pounding madly as they tore through Cavern Hole, across Great Hall, and up the stairs. They reached the guest bedroom not a second too soon. Sounds of Redwallers coming out of the dormitories to investigate the noises echoed along the corridors. Slipp closed the door as quietly as his shaking limbs would allow him to.

“Quick, get inter yer bed an snore! he croaked.

Blaggut needed no second bidding. He hurled himself into bed, swept the sheets over his head, and began snoring. Slipp followed suit. A moment later he heard the door open carefully and the voice of Abbot Saxtus.

“Well, whatever it was, it wasnt these two; theyre snoring like a pair of stuffed hogs.

His voice was followed by that of Brother Fingle.

“Aye, Father Abbot, hogs at the table and hogs in bed. Wed best go and check on the Dibbuns.

The door closed, and their pawsteps receded down the passage, Slipp sat up in bed, about to make some indignant comment on being called a hog when he remembered something odd. “Blaggut, he said, “when you jumped in bed just then, was yore bedlinen all upset, the way you left it?

“Upset? No, Capn, it was all tidy an shipshape. Slipp ran a trembling paw across the neat counterpane. While he and Blaggut had been downstairs, somebeast, or something, had visited their room and remade the beds!

# 22

Glokkpod took off from the valley floor again, flapping wearily upward into the rain-dashed night. Iris watched him go, shaking her head doubtfully.

“Thats the fourth try now. The rope is heavy, maybe too heavy. Each time the Butcher Bird gets more tired.1

Troutlad peered into the mist, watching for any sign of hordebeasts. “The birds their only hope up there; if he cant get the rope to em, theyre deadbeasts.

Mariel leaned out over the ruined attic beams. She watched the shrikes painful efforts, thumping her paws on the beams. “Come on! Oh, come on, Glokkpod, you can do it!

The Butcher Bird was almost halfway up to the tower top when he seemed to run short of energy. The wings flapped awkwardly, he hovered and dropped slightly, hampered by three ropes knotted into one coiled about his neck. Struggling gallantly the shrike sought to pick up his wing action.

Dandin bit his Up anxiously. “The ropes are too heavy, theyre pulling him down! he said.

Gael Squirrelking had given up hope. “Hes never going to do it. Its too high.

Heaving his ponderous stomach across a roofbeam, Me I drum the Magnificent watched Glokkpod. “Ive just had an idea, super wheeze really. You chaps keep silent now, no matter what I say.

Raising his voice, the old hare began insulting the shrike. “Call yself a bird? Youre a disgrace tthe species, sah! Ive seen worms do better at fly in than you! Hah! Butcher Bird, Ill bet yfather was a dead duck an your mother was a half-shot cuckoo! Go on, give it up, youll never make it, you useless lump of pillow stuffin, you great blatherin, bobblewinged, bandy-beaked blow-bag!

“Rakachakk! I kill yirr, Mildrin!

Pure murder shone from the eyes of the red-backed shrike as he began powering his wings upward. Meldrum twitched his rain-soaked

mustachio cheekily and carried on. “Kill me? You must be jestin, featherface. You couldnt damage cream on top of a hot scone, let alone kill me. If I had wings Id fly circles round you, you eggwalloper!

“Kiiinrr! I do mirdir on yirr, you fat hirr! Regardless of rain, tired wings, and the weight of the rope, the Butcher Bird punished its body into mad upward flight, screaming challenges all the way.

“Mildrin, yirr a dead hirr! Kiiiirrrakachak!

In a wet flurry of wings Glokkpod landed among them.

Mariel, Dandin, and Gael had to throw themselves between Glokkpod and Meldrumthe Butcher Bird was intent on killing the hare. Meldrum kept his distance, trying to pacify the shrike.

“Calm down, old lad. I was only chivvyin you on a bit so youd get the rope up here. Didnt really mean it, wot?

But Glokkpod would not be satisfied. He strained toward Meldrum, stabbing with his fearsome beak. “Yirr deadnow, Mildrin longirzz, I killyirr!

Mariel did the only thing she could do under the circumstances. Pulling the rope from the shrikes neck, she shoved hard, overbalancing Glokkpod so that he fell from the tower. The Butcher Bird spread his wings and, soaring in an upward arc, he circled the towertop, screeching, “Yirr cowwid, longirzz, cowwid! Nofight, yirr all mouth!

Mariel swung the coiled rope, warning Glokkpod off. “Dont be a silly bird. Cant you see Meldrum was only doing it so you could fly up here? If he hadnt called you those names, youd never have made it!

But there was no reasoning with the maddened bird. “Kiiiirrr! Nobeast live after sultin thissbird! Glokkpod go now, I finished with yizz. Lissin, longirzz, we ever meet again, I kill yirr, friens not save yirr. Kiiirrrraka-chakiiiiirnr!

Glokkpod winged off into the rain-splashed darkness and was gone from sight.

Meldrum uncoiled the rope. “Strange feller, no sense of humor at all. Ah well, whos for a spot of jolly old escapin, wot?

The rope had to be doubled so it could be freed to get them down

from the west-wall battlements. Dandin draped it over the stoutest of the roof support beams, checking to see both ends were level. Gael Squirrelking surprised them all by grasping the twin sides of the rope and lowering himself away. “Let me go first, weak as I am. If a squirrel cant do it, nobeast can!

Bluebane knocked timidly on the Foxwolfs bedchamber door. There was no answer, so he knocked louder, starting slightly as Nagru shouted, “Stop that knocking and get in here!

Bluebane scurried in and crouched by the mound of cushions that formed his masters resting place. Nagrus head appeared over the top of them, close to Bluebanes. “So, what is it this time, tittletattle?

“Lord, I stayed by the tower door listening carefully. The Butcher Bird brought them a rope. They plan on swinging across to the west-wing edge, where they can land on the battlements. From there theyll be able to get down to the moat. Gael is already on the rope. The Butcher Bird quarreled with the hare, and he has flown off. I dont think he will come back, Sire.

Nagru slid from the mound of cushions. “Tell the Lady Silvamord I wish to speak with her.

Gael had not climbed since his younger days. He was older and slower now, but his natural squirrel skills aided him in clambering down. Soon he was hanging from both ends of the doubled rope. He began swinging himself back and forth. To and fro he urged his body on the rope ends, each arc of his swing getting wider, until he saw the west wall through the mist and rain, its battlemented top getting closer with each fresh swing.

Down below, Iris was banking on the success of the plan. The escapers would need good backup and covering fire.

“Troutlad, take half the crew, get to the top of the plateau steps, and watch for the drawbridge being lowered. If any try to come out, stop them. Greenbeck, stay here and see they get down safe. Give any help you can. Ill go to the steps with Troutlad, thats where the main action should come if Nagru finds out theyre trying to escape.

Nagru told Silvamord of the escape, and she affected an air of disdain. “So, what do you want me to do? Youre the warlord.

The Foxwolfs tone was reasonable. “I thought we might work together for a change, stop fighting each other and fight the enemy.

The vixen too kept a level tone, though her quick mind was watching for double dealing. “Yes, that sounds sensible. As I said, what do you want me to do?

“I thought you might want to take a patrol down to the valley floor and catch them as they climb down the plateau.

Silvamords reply was definitely cool. “Thats more your style. I have a better idea. Why dont we take a good squad up to the west battlements and grab them one by one as they swing in?

“Good idea! the Foxwolf said, smiling thinly. “Though why you dont want to go down to the valley floor puzzles me. Have you had trouble out there already?

The vixen shot a sly glance at Bluebane, then turned to Nagru. “You should know, your eyes and ears are everywhere, Foxwolf.

As they walked to the horde barracks to pick out a squad, Sicant caught up with Silvamord. The vixen whispered to her, “It was Bluebane who had your mate, Gray-wort, slain.

Gaels footpaws had touched the battlements once, then on his return swing he made it. Clamping footpaws and tail firmly over the protruding stones, he let go of the rope. Mariels voice came to him faintly from above, “Gael, are you safe?

Cupping paws around his mouth, the Squirrelking called back, “Yes, Im on the battlements. Mariel, I dont need the rope to go the rest of the way, I can climb down the wall, the plateau side, too, once Ive gotten across the moat.

Mariels answer came back immediately. “Good, then dont wait about there, escape while you can. Well be down right after you. Go, your wife and babe need you. Gael started scaling the walls down to the moat, sure-pawed and nimble now that freedom was within his reach.

Mariel nodded to Dandin.Youre next, mate.

“No, after you, miss. Ill go last!

“Im the senior officer here, I go last, mlad! huffed Meldrum.

Mariel spread her paws in despair. “We cant all go last. Look, whos going now?

Dandin and Meldrum pointed firmly at her. “You!

Mariel let herself down onto the ropes, muttering, “Well, if somebeast doesnt go well be stuck up here all season. Here goes!

Armed with pikes and archery equipment, thirty horde-rats, led by Nagru and Silvamord, sneaked furtively along the ramparts until they were at the west battlement edge. Crouching down in the shadows, Silvamord whispered to Nagru, “We catch them one by one as they land, right?

Pulling the wolfhide about him to shelter from the rain, Nagru neatly sidestepped any responsibility. “Your idea, my Lady. Make your move.

Silvamord crawled forward armed with a pike that was double hooked below its blade. She thrust it at Bluebane. “Hook them in by the footpaws, she hissed. “Well be waiting to grab them.

The vixen winked at the spy. “Do it well, and Ill reward you!

Mariel had reached the ropes end. Kicking against the wall, she began swinging herself. Rain beat on her face as she pendulumed back and forth, widening the arc each time. Blinking water from her eyes, she peered into the mist each time she sailed west.

Bluebane recognized her as she swung into view and vanished back into the night again. “My Lady, its not the Squirrelking; its the mousemaid!

Nagru growled out of his wolfhide shelter. “I dont care who it is, yank them in. Do it!

Bluebane timed it nicely. He stood erect, holding the battlement with one paw, and swung the barbed end of the pike toward the mousemaid on the rope.

Mariel could not stop herself. She saw the rat strike out toward her with the pike as she sped toward the battlement on the rope. Kicking her paws hard against the wall, she shot outward. The kick gave her extra impetusshe avoided the pike and shot over Bluebanes head. The rope struck the gable of the wall and was torn from her paws. From behind came the sound of a vicious hiss; an arrow stood out between Bluebanes eyes. He fell backward into the hordebeasts as Mariel landed heavily on top of Nagru. Pandemonium broke outstamping hard on the wolf-skull, the mousemaid leaped free and went dashing along the ramparts. The dead wolfs fangs had cut two furrows on

Nagrus brow. Lying flat out, he roared, “Get her! Kill the mousemaid!
1

The first rat who jumped upright to obey met with another arrow. Silvamord scrambled on all fours after Mariel. Taking her lead and keeping safe, the other rats followed. Nagru sat up, tenderly feeling his head where the fangs had pierced. Looking around, he realized that he was alone. An arrow zipped by overhead, and instinctively the Foxwolf ducked and scurried off on all fours shouting, “Come back here, you deserters. Wait for me!

Dandin leaned over the rafters, staring down into the mist, his vision hampered by the nighttime rain. “Theres something gone wrong down there. Mariel may need help. I must go to her!

Without wasting further words he grasped the ropes and vanished over the edge of the tower top. Meldrum wrung rainwater from his ears as he called after Dandin, “As ywere! I gave no orders for you to go shimmy in off down that rope, sah! Come back, dye hear me? The hare watched the rope begin swinging from side to side and straightened his jacket resolutely. “Hmph, mustnt have heard me, not like that young feller to disobey an order! Right, youre next, Fallowthorn.

# 23

Mariel was far too quick to catch. Vaulting battlements, cutting corners, and slamming doors behind her, she dashed off into the rambling passages of Castle Floret. The mousemaid could hear her pursuers behind her, tripping and stumbling as they hastened to catch her. Skipping nimbly down the dizzying stone steps of a spiral staircase, she ran full tilt into a horderat coming the other way. The mousemaid could not stop herself from barging into the rat; he was taken completely off guard, and with a panicked squeak he toppled backwards, hurtling tip over tail down the stairs. Bruising her paws on the rough-hewn stones, the mousemaid managed to stay upright. She slowed her pace as she approached the rat. He lay crumpled at the bottom of the stairwell, completely senseless. Mariel paused momentarily to relieve him of a sharp, double-headed axe he had thrust in his belt. The sounds of Silvamord and her troop pattering down the stairs kept the mousemaid on the move. Hurtling out down a corridor she cut left and then right, looking wildly about for somewhere to hide.

Nagru had traveled down by a different route, ordering horderats to follow him as he went. “Leave what youre doing, come on, bring your weapons! Threading his way through chamber and hall he rushed onward, with more than a score in his wake. Now Mariel could hear her enemies coming from both sides, still some distance away, but getting closer by the moment. She brandished the axe, looking left and right desperately. There was only one way left to go. Lifting the latch of a door in front of her, she entered. It was a small inner chamber, devoid of windows. Mariel closed the door, noting that it had neither lock nor bolt to protect her. She had run herself into a cul-de-sac, and it was too late to escape now. Taking up a warriors stance, she gripped the axe handle tight, prepared to go down fighting.

Safely on the battlements, Dandin reached out with the pike that Bluebane had been carrying. Meldrum wobbled and swayed as he clung for dear life to the swinging rope. The young mouse called encouragingly to him, “Just a bit more, sir. Come on, swing yourself forward another fraction.

With both eyes shut tight the hare did as he was bidden.

“Gotcha! Dandin hooked the curved pike crosstree into the hem of Meldrums pink mess jacket and pulled him to the battlement. Seizing

both the old hares foot-paws, Dandin stretched him over the stone top and took the weight. “You can let go of the rope now, Meldrum! Let go of the rope and open your eyes, thats an order!

The old hare opened one eye, saw he was safe, and clambered down onto the rampart with as much dignity as he could muster. “Incorrect procedure, laddie buck; a subordinate cant give orders to a rankin offisah. Well let it go this time. Well done, well done. Now, whats been goin on round here? Whereve all the bally vermin gone?

Dandin gazed at the rat carcasses and the empty rainswept walltop. “More important, wheres Mariel gone? he said.

The rope was caught on a niche of the battlement. Meldrum began pulling it in and coiling it. “Where dyou think shes gone, bright little gel like that? Escaped, of course, bally well scarpered!

Dandin however was not convinced. “Escaped? How could she have escaped?

“Dont ask me, mlad. Im no expert in these matters, Meldrum said as he fussed with the torn hem of his tunic, “but Ill lay you an acorn to an apple theyve not captured her. Shed have yelled out an warned us.

Dandin peered down. He could barely make out the moat below. “I suppose youre right, sir. Wonder how she got to the moat without the rope, though?

Meldrum the Magnificent snorted through his musta-chios. “Jumped, of course. A young rip like her wouldnt think twice about takin a leap. Good job we dont have to, wot? Wouldnt chance it at my age. Lucky for us weve got the jolly old rope to swarm down, eh!

Dandin still looked doubtful, so Meldrum took command. “Mariel will be furious if she thinks were slandin up here twiddlin our paws all night. Situation calls for decision. Im givin the orders now. Get that rope around mis battlement. Look sharp, now, youre first down! Realizing there was no other sensible course to follow, but still beset by doubts, Dandin doubled the rope about the stones and began his descent to the moat.

A voice startled Mariel as she stood alone in the darkened chamber. “A mouse that fights and runs away, lives to fight another day!

Barely visible in the dim light from under the door, a fat mole clad in a belted shagreen tunic stood watching the mousemaid. “Twittering is

for the birds, but earthly creatures heed wise words. Follow me, mousemaid, he said, nodding sociably at her.

The exit appeared to Mariel as a small black hole in a corner, but as she crawled through and watched the mole close it behind them, she realized it was a cunningly hinged stone door, which blended perfectly with the walls about it. Feeling completely safe she followed the mole down dark dusty tunnels, keeping one paw against his back in case she lost him in the gloom. They traveled downward, twisting and turning in the strange moles silent world. Sometimes they passed through cellars and caves, other times they had to bend double and crawl along. They halted at a small, stout-timbered door, whereupon the mole produced a key and opened it.

“This humble abode doth suit me fine, a simple homely place, tis mine.

He turned up the flame on an oil lamp, and yellow light flooded the room. It had a couch which served as a bed, a table, and a big, elm-planked larder cupboard. The whole place was littered with books, scrolls, and parchments. The fat mole bobbed his head politely to her, extending well-groomed digging claws. “I am Egbert the Scholar, and you, I take it, are the escaped prisoner, Mariel.

Questions flooded to Mariels lips as she took Egberts paw and shook it. “Pleased to meet you, Egbert. But how do you know my name, and why do you not speak like other moles?

Egbert sat her down on his sofa bed, then taking a thin tin plate, he placed it on a bracket above the oil lamp and began warming two plump vegetable turnovers. Filling a beaker, he offered it to Mariel. “Dandelion cordialI brew it myself. Drink up, food will soon be ready. As to your questions, Mariel, I know your name and your companions, too. Nothing goes on in Floret that escapes my notice. You were very clever to escape the way you did, extricating yourself from a dire predicamentah, long words, I love the sound of them! As to why I am, who I am, that is a complicated narration, a long story,

“Egbert the Scholar is a name I gave myself. I was once a mole like others, humming and urring and much given to bucolic speech forms. I had a mole name too, something very moleish, Soilburr it was, as I recall. I lived a happy and simple existence with my tribe, east of here, but I thirsted for learning and the ways of the scholar. So I left home and came here, tunneled in and set myself up. Nobeast ever knew I was inside Floret, not Gael or Serena, or that pair of barbarian

vermin, Nagru and Silvamord.

Mariel accepted the hot turnover, biting into the pastry and eating ravenously, regardless of the dark aromatic warm gravy that dribbled onto her paws. She spoke around mouthfuls of hot, tender vegetables and pastry crust. “Mmm, slovely! But what do you do here with your life?

Egbert gestured at the files of books and scrolls lining the walls of his little home. “I study to better my knowledge, to improve my powers of learning; one can never have sufficient education. Did you know that the Squir-relking and his family were heirs to an extensive library? Oh yes, a veritable palace of literature, all in one great room. My lifes work is dedicated now to saving it. Those dreadful rats use rare manuscripts and valuable books to light their fires, can you believe it?

“Fortunately I come and go in Floret by my own secret routes. I pop up in the library whenever I can and take away material, though I fear my little abode is getting too small to hold it all. Just look at these scrolls I retrieved today, a treatise on autumn-cloud formations in the southinvaluable!

Egbert paused and smiled apologetically. “Mariel, forgive me for prattling on ceaselessly. I must be boring you to death with my lengthy discourses. Being alone one tends to talk to oneself a lot, but twice as much to visitors like yourself. Is there anything you want? Would you like to take a napyou look tiredor is there any way at all I can help you?

Mariel finished the turnover, washing it down with refreshing dandelion cordial. She stood and picked up her axe. “I must go and help my friends now. They are trapped at the top of the north tower.

Egbert clipped a quaint pair of spectacles to his nose and studied a blueprint of Floret pinned on the wall. “Ah yes, the north tower; very high, extremely perilous. So thats where you got to; I thought you were all lost or slain when you escaped the dungeons. North tower, hmm, not a lot we can do up there, Im afraid. Maybe if you created a diversion in another part of this castle, that would give your comrades time to escape without interference.

Mariel hefted the axe eagerly. “That sounds good, Egbert. What do you suggest?

“Let me apply logic to this problem, the scholar said as he sat on his bed and nibbled at his turnover. “Now, let me see. If you have allies

outside, some of the otters, say ... Ah yes, thats it! The drawbridge, find your way into the gatehouse and mess up the mechanism, cut the ropes. Then the drawbridge will fall open, giving easy access to your allies, and Foxwolf will have to defend it with his horde. I should think the last thing hell be worrying about in a case like that is a few escaped prisoners stranded on a towertop ...

Mariel was already holding the door open. “What a great idea! Lead on, Egbertwheres this gatehouse?

“A creature of action I see, a warrior! The scholar put aside his food and arose. “But you cannot do it alone, and I am not a fighter. Follow me and I will take you to where there are other warriors.

Again they were off, Mariel hurrying in Egberts wake, through a succession of tunnels and underground chambers where daylight had never shone. The mousemaid sensed they were moving in a downward direction; she felt a coolness across her nostrils, which she knew could only be the air from outside. After founding a few more bends and climbing over a blockage of rubble and rock, they emerged into a sizeable cavern. The rain outside could be heard pattering and splashing; half the chamber was thick with mist that had rolled in from the valley floor. Egbert sat on a rock, nodding with satisfaction. “Ah, here we are. Hello my friends ... anybeast at home?

A lightning-swift form snatched the axe from Mariel, bowling her over. The mousemaids cry of surprise was squashed from her as two huge paws swept her off the ground, crushing and squeezing unmercifully. Mariel found herself dangling helplessly in the air, staring into a pair of maddened bloodshot eyes ...

# 24

Finnbarr Galedeep watched anxiously as the triangular gray-blue fin sailed in close to the midships of Pearl Queen, Rufe tugged at the sea otters paw. “Well, is it a shark, Mr. Finnbarr?

Finnbarr nodded unhappily. “Aye, liddle Rufey, tis a shark all right. Big monster, too. Lookit that, Vs watchin us, the villain.

The shark had turned slightly on its side. Above the crescent-gashed mouth with its rows of ripping teeth a small, circular eye stared at them. Finnbarr kept his good eye on the monster. “Dont call out loud or make sudden movements, Rufey, he murmured quietly. “We dont wants ter excite this fishtheyve been known to wreck vessels, just to git at the crew an eat em.

Rufe stole silently away. Finnbarr called after him in a loud whisper, “Rufey, mate, where are ye goin?

“To keep miz Rosie quietif she starts laffin were all done for!

Rufe was knocked from his feet as Pearl Queen shook from stem to stern. He crawled over to Finnbarr. “Is the shark attackin our ship now? he said.

The sea otter watched the maneuvers of the great shark. “No, es only playin with us, scrapin his hide along the ships sides, scratchin hisself, ymight say. Sharks likes to do that now an agin. Look out, ere comes the other sleepin beauties, all waked up an fit fer a fright.

The vessel juddered again under the impact of the sharks rubbing. Rosie Woodsorrel was knocked in a heap with the rest. She sat on the deck giggling aloud. “Whoo-hahahooh! I say, bit bumpy tday, wot? Whooha ... Rufe effectively gagged her by throwing himself bodily across her face.

“Miz Rosie, hush, please hush!

Log-a-Log lifted Rufe off Rosie. “Whats the matter, young un?

Rufe seized hold of Durry and Patch, pulling them to the rail. “Its a shark monster attackin* our ship!

They grabbed the rail alongside Finnbarr as the vessel quivered under

a heavy swipe from the sharks blunt snout. Finnbarr slapped the rail, exhaling loudly. “Well, e wasnt attackin us afore; jus bein playful an nosy. That was til you started laffin, marm!

Rosie leaned over amidships to view the massive bulk of the shark. It could be seen clearly now by all the crew. From tip to tail it was nearly as long as Pearl Queen, a true monster of the deep, with rows of slitted gills on either side of the huge evil head, a white underbelly, and bluish-black back markings. With a powerful flick of its sickle-shaped tail it sped away from the ship.

Rosie waved. “Oh look, hes going. Good show, wot? Whoohahahooh!

Finnbarr gritted his teeth as he looked at Joseph. “Will yew stuff a gag down that long-eared foghorns mouth, mate? That shark aint goin. Es just takin a run so e kin charge us proper. All crew ang on tight!

The shark came back like a juggernaut, spray flying from its fin as it headed straight at Pearl Queens bows. Finnbarr leaped to the tiller, shoving it hard over in the same direction as the shark was traveling. It hit forard.

Whummmm!

Log-a-Log ran to Finnbarr* s assistance shouting, “Well done, Finn. You took most of the force out of that blow, goin the same way the shark did!

Durry had run forard. He shouted from the bowsprit, “The sharks gone under the water now, I cant see him!

Pearl Queen shuddered fitfully. “Its underneath now, scraping along the keel, said Joseph, pointing down.

Finnbarr made ready with the tiller. “Tell me where e comes up agin an ow es comin at us!

Durry stayed forard, Joseph took the stern, while Rufe and Patch climbed into the lower rigging to port and starboard. Late-afternoon shadows lengthened on deck, sails flapped gently, and rigging creaked, as the four lookouts scanned the sea around them. Suddenly Durry called out, “Here it comes again, dead on forard!

Finnbarr and Log-a-Log were quick this time; they shot the tiller hard aport and were rewarded by Durrys cheer. “Hurray! The shark never touched us that time!

Silence again ...

Rosie sat with a towel in her mouth, eyes traveling back and forth. Josephs paws gripped the rail; he shouted, “Look out, its coming at us from astern ... No wait!... Its gone down again. Rufe! Over by you!

Rufe Brush anchored his tail around a spar, screaming, “The shark, the shark! Comin starboard side amidships!

Again the sea otter and the shrew threw the tiller aport, Finnbarr muttering as they did, “Cant git outta the way much if the rogue belts us amidships!

Boooommmm!

The entire ship shook sickeningly under the impact.

“Hog overboard, Durrys in the water! somebeast yelled.

The shark was a short distance away. Feeling the agitation caused by Durrys thrashing paws, it homed in on him, heading straight and swift as an arrow. Durry was being swept along level with the midships as Joseph yelled out, “Get a line! Somebeast throw him a line!

Already the Bellmaker was dashing to the rail. He saw it would be too late for Durry in a very short time. Without thinking he grabbed the nearest thingForemole. Grasping the moles footpaws firmly, Joseph shot him out through a gap in the rails, shouting aloud, “Stretch out, Foremole! Durry, get hold of him quick! The hedgehog practically leaped from the sea to grab Foremoles digging claws, and he held on like a leech.

“Oo urr yurr cumms zurr shark!

The vicious head lifted clear of the waves, mouth agape as it hurled itself at Durry. Josephs grip on Foremole was like a vise. The powerful Bellmaker lifted back his head, roaring at the sky as he gave an almighty heave.

“Redwaaaalll!

Thokk!

Foremole and Durry shot over Josephs head, so great was the strength he put into his effort. All three collapsed in a heap on the deck, Joseph wriggling backward calling, “Look out, the sharkstay clear!

The sharks head was stuck between the midship rails. Pearl Queen listed heavily as the giant brute thrashed and pulled. Log-a-Log grabbed a boarding pike, Finnbarr unsheathed his swords, and together they charged the shark. Jumping from side to side, avoiding the snapping jaws and slashing teeth, Finnbarr Galedeep attacked ferociously with both swords, hacking and thrusting at the monstrous head. The ship began heeling perilously as it pushed forward, wriggling its body, thrusting to get at its tormentor.

Log-a-Log saw Finnbarr slip and fall to the water-slicked deck, and with a wild cry he charged the shark.

“Logalogalogalogafog!

The shrew Chieftain drove the pike hard into the fleshy area above the sharks mouth. With a dreadful rattling, hissing noise it recoiled sharply and fell free of the smashed rails into the sea. Pearl Queen bobbed upright, freed of the great weight, water running from her gunwales in torrents. The crews mighty cheer was overshadowed by Fatch shouting from the rigging, “Finnbarr! Another shark, coming from astern!

Sure enough, there was the deadly triangular fin of yet another sea monster plowing steadily toward Pearl Queen.

To the amazement of the crew, Finnbarr Galedeep began a little jig around the tiller. “Hahaharr, were saved! Hohoho, good ole shark!

Rosie took the towel from her mouth. “The poor chaps gone cuckoo. Whats he laughin at?

Finnbarr sat on the tiller, swinging to and fro. “Haharr, youll see, marm. Mad, am I? Watch that other shark!

The other shark ignored the ship completely and headed right for the injured monster, scenting its blood in the water. The sea thrashed up red foam as predator attacked predator.

Joseph turned away from the sickening sight. “Now I know what you were laughing at, Finnbarr. The sharks are cannibals; theyll eat each other.

The otter resumed his position at the tiller. “Aye, theyre scavengers. Theyll attack anythin thats bleedin an injured, Seabeasts dont know about pity. So now, Be 11 maker, ask the fates n fortunes t be good an sail us inter land soon.

“Sail into land, what for? Joseph appeared puzzled by the request.

The sea otter gave a rueful grin. “I knew the tiller wasnt workin rightit didnt budge the Queen last time yon shark charged us amidships. Now I knows why. That scurvy seabeast snapped our rudder clean off when it was attackin us.

Joseph tested the tiller; it swung limply back and forth. “You mean that you cant control the vessel?

“Aye, thats about the size of it, Joseph. Were at the mercy of the igh seas, matey, an tis comin on night too. Ill post lookouts in the riggin, and if they sights land we might be able to row an scull, sos we kin elp pore ole Pearl Queen inter shore. Then I kin fix er up.

Fortunately the night seas lay calm, with little wind or breeze to carry the vessel one way or another. Rosie and Foremole took first watch aft, with two shrews standing forard. Foremole turned his gaze up to the star-strewn skies. After a lengthy spell, in which he attempted a star count, he turned to his companion.

“Youm be vurry soilent, marm. Be ee thinken? he asked.

Rosie tossed an apple core overboard; it bobbed on the surface aimlessly. “What, er, oh yes, thinkin. Hmm, cant help wonderin how Tarquin is coping with the family back at Redwall. Im a dreadful creature really, wot? Coin off harum scarum, sailin* and questin, while poor old Tarkers is probly workin his paws to the bone lookin after the family. There must be a lot of butterfly in me somewhere.

Foremole scanned the dark horizon, his chin resting on both paws. “Youm baint no butterflyer, marm. Usns are only a doin our dooty, elpin friends and followin Martins request. Zurr Tarquin an ee liddle uns, hurr, oanly danger they be in is frumm eatin too much. Yore famly be a gurt lot safer at ee Abbey than usns out ere on ee gurt sea wi no rudder to steer us.

The optimistic hare pulled another apple from her tunic and began munching happily. “Youre right of course, old thing. Ill bet Tarquin and the family will be so bally tubby I wont recognize em when we return. Bunch of gluttons, scoffin away at all that lovely food, without a thought of their poor mater starvin out here on the deep. Wot?

Foremole smiled as another apple core went sailing over the stern rail and plopped into the sea. “Hurr, youm roight thurr, marm!

# 25

Joseph roused Durry, Rufe, and Patch for the dogwatch in the two hours before dawn. Rufe yawned and stretched mightily saying, “Looks like weve been bobbing upn down in the same place all night to me.

Patch cast a weighted line over the side, noting its progress. “No, mate, weve been movin all right, only slow, but steady.

Durry sniffed the still air appreciatively. “Wood bum-in in the galley, soon be breakfast time. Im fair starved, an thats a fact!

They had not long to wait. Finnbarr appeared with a tray. “Some early vittles fer me gallant watchbeasts. Come on, mates, theres a bowl of ot veggible soup apiece an some fresh baked bread. Tuck in!

While they ate, Finnbarrs keen eyes spotted the telltale signs to the east in the early dawn light. “There tis, land ho, buckoes!

Durry ran to the rail, bowl in paw. “Landwhere? I cant see anything.

The sea otter chided him merrily. “Thats cos yer a cellar og from an Abbey, but well make a sailor of yer yet, young Quill. Ahoy, Patch, yore a waterbeast, show Durry the landfall.

The Guosim shrew pointed with a fresh bread crust. “East. See that bundle of gray cloud, matey? Well, it aint cloud; thats land, though it dont look like much.

Finnbarr climbed into the rigging for a better view. “Aye, yer right, all rock an cliff, but any ole portll do fer rudderless ducks like us. Rufey, rouse all paws, well set sail fer any breeze tcarry us to it.

Under Finnbarr Galedeeps skillful navigation Pearl Queen hove alongside the high, grim rocks in bright morning sunlight. Log-a-Log stared up at the gray forbidding cliffs saying, “No place we can berth her around here, Finn!

The sea otter took up a boarding pike. “Thats a fact. Come on, crew, git pikes iT spars. Well push er round these rocks until we finds a landing!

Striving and sweating under the eye of the hot morning sun, the crew

pushed at the rock face with pikes and spars. It was high noon when they found a landfall on the island. A rocky cove opening out into a forest-fringed beach, the high cliffs rearing either side of the entrance, it gave Pearl Queen scant leeway. Finnbarr winced as the vessel scraped through the opening with barely a splinter to spare; he called out orders to guide them through.

“Joseph, Durry, Rosie, git rope fenders oer the sides to protect er. You aloft, turn those mast spars sideways or theyll be smashed. Fatch, sound the depth with a lead!

Rufe had the best view of the incoming shore from his perch in the bows, and he could not believe his eyes. “Ships! Look, theres ships in here, Finnbarr!

And ships there were, but none of them in any fit state to sail on the sea. They were all wrecks. Finnbarr cast an experienced eye over the hulks that littered the shoreline where beach met cliff on both sides. “Harr, thats a sad sight, messmates! Thatn there is a merchant ship, tother side of it looks like a searat galley, an lookit that, an ole otter fishin smack. Tis long seasons since I clapped eyes on one o* those!

Joseph came up to stand beside Finnbarr. “But theyre all wrecked beyond repair. What dyou suppose happened here, Finn? he asked.

“Happened? Nothin, mate. Theyve all been thrown up ere by the sea, blown toward this island durin storms an forced through that gap in the rocks on floodtides. Ah well, mates, one beasts ill wind is anothers good fortune. Well soon find us a spankin good rudder in this cove!

Joseph scouted out a good axe, Log-a-Log took a broken and chipped sword to serve as a saw, and Finnbarr found his heavy mallet. Pearl Queen nosed into the soft sands of the shallows, and the trio of rudder finders prepared to wade ashore. Rosie pouted a little. “Bit of a bore, wot, all of us cooped up here on board; we could be off into those woods lookin for fresh water and provisions.

The Bellmaker wagged a warning paw at her. “Stay where you are, Rosie Woodsorrel, and pay attention to Finnbarr. We dont want the crew wandering loose about this island, you never know what beasts may be lurking inland.

A rudder was found sticking from the stern of a highbeached wreck. They got to work immediately, and, using the mallet and the axe, Log-a-Log and Joseph unpinned it from its moorings. Finnbarr stood on the deck of the wreck. “Thisns been a fast Corsair craft in er day, single

masted an* flat bottomed for coastal raidin. Aye aye, why dont we use er mainmast to replace our broken one?

Rufe and his two friends attached themselves to a party of shrews who came aboard to remove the mast. It was hard and heavy work under the hot noonday sun. Rosie had given up sulking and appointed herself cook. She and Foremole were in the galley inventing a huge mixed-fruit and honey pudding for the evening meal.

“Wheres the candied chestnuts got to? Foremole, you villain, stop nibblin them an pass them here!

The mole relinquished the nuts with a guilty smile. “Burr, theym good uns, me an ee Abbot picked em last autumn; theym been soakin in ee cask of hunny ever since. Ho urr, oi dearly do luv a good candy chesknutter, hoo aye!

Rosie stuffed several in her mouth and spoke around them. “So do I. Dyou think its worth savin* any for the crew?

Pearl Queens crew worked late into the evening on Finnbarrs urging. “Fix er tday, sail away tomorrer, mates, thats the ticket! Besides, I dont like angin around on this island. I got a funny feelin* in me stum-mick about the place, tis too nice.

Joseph wielded the mallet, hammering home the last copper spikes that held the rudder brackets in place. He tested the tiller and found it swung well. “There, a good job well done! Hows the mast coming along, Log-a-Log, nearly there?

“Aye, almost ready, the shrew Chieftain called up from the forard hold. “Im seatin* it in pitch an caul kin it tight with oakum so itll be waterproof and stand firm.

Foremole and Rosie poked their heads from the galley. “Wem gotten noice cool tober ale yurr for ee!

“And a Pearl Queen Pudden, though you chaps best hurry or itll start stick!n to the stove!

The rudder workers joined the mast riggers, and with the added help of willing paws they had the foremast rigged as the sun dipped below the western horizon and night set in.

The Pearl Queen Pudden was voted a huge success by all the crew, who went back licking their spoons for second helpings. Rosie undid

her apron with a flourish, winking at Foremole. “Yknow, it wouldnt hurt old Finnbarr to appoint me permanent cook aboard this vessel, jolly wise choice!

Foremole heaped two bowls with pudding for himself and Rosie. “Iie must amember, miz Rose, that cookers be potwashers too, hurr.

Rosie threw the apron to a nearby shrew. “Hmph! Ive just resigned!

Sheltered by the high rocks, the cove was snug from wind and weather. With no anxiety and the prospect of sailing on the morrow, Pearl Queens crew lay about on the hatch covers, eating, drinking, and singing. Rosie was prevailed upon to perform her laughing song. With Finnbarr twiddling the keys of his ottercordion, she braced herself and launched into it.

The crew found themselves sorry they had asked her to start. Rosie stood demurely, paws clasped, eyelids aflutter, and began singing in a piercing soprano voice, outrageously twisting and elongating the words:

“There is nought on this earth to com-pa-a-a-a-are, With a comely young fee-hee-male ha-a-a-a-a-are, He-er beauty is winsome to see-e-ee-e-e-ee-ee, She will smile and shell larff pri-ti-lee-eeeeeeee! Whoohahahahooh haha, whoohahahahooh ha ha ha.

She smiled coyly at her stunned audience. “Tarquin wrote this for me, yknowtheres another six verses. Shall I sing them for you, chaps?

There followed a joint unplugging of paws from ears as the entire crew yelled in a single voice, “No thank you!

The Hon Rosie sniffed airily as she launched herself at a bowl of pudding. “Rotten lot. Somebeasts have no appreciation at all of lifes finer things, wot?

However, her indignation soon vanished as she clapped paws with the rest, in time to Josephs rendition of an old favorite. Finnbarr twiddled an accompaniment as the Bell-makers strong baritone voice echoed around the cove.

“O Willyum mole to his father said,

Why dont I hear daybreak?

And why cant I hear the nightfall?

No noise does either make.

O riddle me diddle me riddle me ree,

Silly old father tell to me,

Why doesnt a fish nest in a tree,

Or a bird fly under the sea?

O wise little son, said his father,

You never hear daybreak,

And youre never awake to hear nightfall,

Youre asleep for goodness sake!

So riddle you diddle you fiddle you do,

Your silly old father loves you true,

If youre good Ill tell you something more,

A beech is a tree and a beach is a shore,

And if sky is blue and wind blew too,

Your silly old father is wiser than you,

So weigh my words as you go on your way.

Tomorrows today when the night falls away! “

Amid the applause that followed Finnbarr slipped back into the darkness, fading away like a shadow. Log-a-Log followed him, rapier at the ready. Rufe noticed them going and said in a loud voice to Patch, “Where are those two going, mate?

“Keep yer voice down, Rufey, an act normal like, the Guosim shrew cautioned him.

There followed a squeal and a scuffle. Joseph reached for a boarding pike as he whispered, “Stay calm, every-beast, keep your weapons close to paw and wait until Finnbarr or Log-a-Log calls us. Theres been something or someone out there since dusk!

“Owow, lemme go! Get ypaws off me, searat!

Durry was startled by the shrill voice. He turned to see Finnbarr hauling a struggling young squirrel over the rail. “Be still, yer liddle rogue, or Ill tan yer ide. Ouch! E bit me!

Log-a-Log materialized out of the gloom, tugging a small, sobbing mousemaid behind him. “Heres another one; I reckon theres more out there!

The mousemaid broke free; throwing herself down in front of Joseph, she pleaded brokenly, “Oh, please dont slay us, sir. Please!

The young squirrel attempted to bite Finnbarr Galedeep again; he struggled and kicked viciously, shouting, “Save your breath Wincey. Theyre pirates, you wont get mercy from this scummy lot!

Rosie Woodsorrel confronted him. “Now see here, young thingummybob, mind your manners. Do we look like pirates?

Squirming hard to get free of the sea otters iron grip, the young squirrel bared his teeth. “If youre not pirates, then tell this big searat to let go of me! he snarled.

Joseph filled two platters with Pearl Queen Pudden, then, taking the mousemaids paw gently, he signaled Finnbarr to release the young squirrel. “Dont be frightened of Finnbarr, he said to them. “Hes just a great big old sea otter. Whats your name, young un?

“My names Benjy an Im not afraid of you or any-beast!

“Of course youre not. Come and have something to eat, Benjy. Joseph placed the plates of pudding in front of Benjy and Wincey, speaking softly to allay their fears. “Rosie, is there any raspberry cordial in the galley? Bring our guests a beaker each. Come on, young uns, eat up. You look as if a plate of pudding apiece would cheer you up. Oh come on now, were not going to hurt you.

They ate hungrily, grunting and snuffling in their haste to get the pudding down. Rosie brought their cordial.

“My word, has there been a seven-season famine around here? She laughed.

With his whiskers coated with fruit and pastry, Benjy shot her a quick glance. “You dont look like no searat, he said.

“I should hope not, and dont speak with ymouth full, Rosie said as she

refilled the two plates. “Were honest voyagers from Redwall Abbey, and we dont go about slayin and whatnot. Just look at you two! A good bath, some more food, an clean clothes is what yneed.

Joseph took the little mousemaid on his lap. “I had a little one like you, though shes quite big now. Tell me, Wincey, how did you come to this place?

She took a great sucking gulp of raspberry cordial and shrugged. “Always been here, I think.

The squirrel called Benjy had moved closer until he was leaning against Joseph. “Aye, always, me an Wincey an Figgs.

“Figgs, whos that? said the Bellmaker, ruffling Ben-jys ears fondly.

Benjy smiled secretly as he licked his pudding plate. “Figgs is Figgs. Shes our sister. Want me to call her?

Before Joseph could reply, Benjy was crying out, “Figgs, Figgs, come out wherever yare! Hurry up. Theyve got nice pudden an drinks an* theyre not sea-rats!

A tiny ottermaid popped her head shyly over the rail. “Puddens nice, Figgs wants some! she squeaked.

Shaking with laughter, Foremole lifted her over the rail. “Ee liddle raggymuffin choild, youm can ave pudden til ee bursters. Youm a needen et t be growen gurt!

Figgs was so tiny that she had to pick up the wooden spoon in both paws, but there was nothing tiny about her appetite.

Finnbarr shook his head in wonderment at her. “She could go to sea in a clamshell with a sail! Ahoy there, Figgs matey, is that the full crew of ye, or is there any more giants out there idin silentlike?

Figgs paused a moment as if thinking hard. “No, only our father. Benjy knows where our father is.

The young squirrel took Joseph, Finnbarr, and Rosie on a short walk into the hinterland of the island. Holding torches, they followed him through thick undergrowth to a tattered sailcloth rigged askew of a fallen aspen. Benjy stopped short of it, pointing as if ashamed to go near. “Our fathers in there, he said.

Finnbarr strode forward and went into the tent. He came out swiftly, shaking his head at Rosie and Joseph. “You dont want ter go in there; faint a nice sight! Tears were rolling silently down Benjys face as the sea otter placed a tattooed paw about his shoulders. “Hush now, matey, yore a big feller now, dont weep. The young squirrel snuffled, wiping tear-stained eyes on his tail. For one so fierce and scarred, the sea otter spoke surprisingly softly.

“Who was that edgeog in there, he asked, “and ow did you all come tthis isle? Tell me, young un.

Benjy sniffed several times before explaining. “Ship was wrecked tpieces out on the sea at the start of summer. Burrom the hedgehog was hurled bad by a falling mast, but she clung to it an pulled us aboard with her. Figgs too, though she was just born; dont know what happened to Figgss mother. We got washed through the rocks into the cove; been living here all through summer. Poor Burrom never really got over that mast falling on her. She was mixed up all the time, talking strange. Benjy shuddered hugely, as if fighting back more tears. Finnbarr kept him talking as a distraction.

“How longs she been like that ... I mean ...

The young squirrel pulled himself together gallantly. “You mean dead? Since last full moon, though I couldnt tell Wincey and Figgs. They kept wanting to see her, but I told them she was sleeping.

“But you said father, Joseph interrupted. “Burrom was a female?

The young squirrel smiled through his tears. “That was Winceys idea. She never knew her father, so she thought it would be nice to call Burrom father. I told Figgs we were her family, brothers and sisters. Shes too small to know any different.

To cheer him up Rosie chuckled, “Well Im a mother and you can count on me, though youll have lots of fathers aboard Pearl Queen, brothers too. Hmm, shouldve brought more sisters along with us!

When they got back to the ship, Foremole had made beds up for Wincey and Figgs in the crews accommodation. Joseph settled down on the hatch covers with Benjy close by, and they lay watching the stars, like silver pins, holding up the dark, velvet canopy of the night sky. Joseph outlined his plans for them. “Were sailing in the morning, right after breakfast. I think you and your sisters would be better off coming along with us, Benjy. What dyou think?

“I think thats the best thing too, sir. Ill have to tell Wincey and Figgs that Burrom wont be coming along. Itll be difficult, specially for little Figgs.

The Bellmaker nodded understandingly. “Youre growing up well, Benjy. You stay aboard with the others, and Finnbarr and I will go ashore early and give Burrom a decent burial.

The young squirrel sat upright. “No, please, leave our father in the tent. I couldnt bear thinking about Burrom buried there all alone. Besides, she might get better and wake up someday ...

“So be it, Benjy, said Joseph, smiling sadly, “but dont grieve. Burrom will be glad that you three are safe and with friends now. Goodnight.

“Goodnight, sir. Oh, may I ask where were going on your ship?

“Its not my ship. Pearl Queen belongs to Finnbarr. Were bound for Southsward to search for my daughter, Mariel, and her friend Dandin. Its a long story.

Benjys eyes shone bright in the darkness. “Southsward, thats my home!

Now it was Josephs turn to sit up. “You come from Southsward?

“Yes, sir, every creature on the ship did. We were driven out of there by Urgan Nagru the Foxwolfhis rats killed both my parents. I want to go back to Southsward!

“Ill bet you do, Benjy! said Joseph, looking steadily at the youngster. “Come to the galley with me; theres food and drink there. We have a lot to discuss.

# BOOK THREE

## 26

Rosy-hued dawn flooded through the guest room window at Redwall Abbey as Mellus and Tarquin stirred the snoring searat Captain from a tangle of sheets.

“Cmon, Slipp, rise and shine, old rat. Lets see if you were Muffin* when you said you could cook.

Slipp tried burrowing deeper into the bed linen, as Tarquin turned him none-too-gently onto the floor. “Go way, sonly just dawn, beat it! he grumbled.

The hefty paw of Mother Mellus scooped the searat up onto his paws. “Less of your insolence! You said you were a cook, so lets see you up and cooking!

Blaggut poked his head from beneath the pillow, giggling dozily as he watched the proceedings. “Show em what yore made of, Capn. Burn up a mess oskilly an duff; thatll warm the cockles of their earts, hahaharr!

The badger turned as she propelled Slipp through the doorway. “I wouldnt laugh too much if I were you, Blaggut; theres two friends outside want to see you. Go in and wake the nice rat up, my Dibbuns!

The mousebabe and the molemaid came dashing in and threw themselves upon Blaggut, buffeting him unmercifully with Slipps pillow. “Cummon, mista Blackguts, Ma Mellus said you was a carpenter, we wanna see you carp!

“Carp, ysay. Well, I dunno, said Blaggut as he sat up and scratched himself absently. “Lets see, mates, wot dyer want ole Blaggy ter carp for ye?

Furrtil the molemaid was in no doubt at all. “Ee lickle boat to sail on ee Abbey pond, zurr, sos usns can set in it. Can ee carp a boat, zurr Blackguts?

Blaggut sensed a chance to help Slipp achieve his desire. “Mebbe I kin, mebbe I caint. Boats dont git carped fer nothin, mates. Dyou know

where the secret treasure of this ere Redwall hAbbey is idden?

The mousebabe looked furtively about, then drawing close he whispered in Blagguts ear, “A course we does!

The searat brightened up; his ruse was working. “Right then, you show me the treasure, an Ill make ee an and-some liddle boat tsail round the pond in, eh?

“No, Zurr, said the molemaid, stroking her digging claws solemnly. “Furst you carp ee boat fer usns, then we tell ee whurr secret treasure be idden, hurt!

Blaggut considered the offer, peering closely at the two well-scrubbed faces radiating honesty and trust at him. “Haharr, you drive an ard bargain, but its a deal, buckoes. One thing though: swear you wont tell anybeast about this?

The mousebabe shook his paw vigorously in Blagguts face. “We don swear. Snot nice tswear, yget sent t bed.

“Bless yer eart, messmate. The dullard searat grinned. “I dont mean swear n curse, I means we gotta take a vow tgetner, a solemn oath.

The three conspirators placed their paws together, and the Dibbuns repeated the words that Blaggut recited:

“I take this oath.

“We take an oaf.

“That me liver n lights be ripped out ifn any of us breathes a word of our secret to anybeast, so elp ee!

“Hurr e liver be gripped when ee lights be out an ee secret breathin of anybeasters to elp ee!

Blaggut scratched his head as both Dibbuns smiled at him.

“I never card it said like that afore, but I spose itll ave ter do, mates!

An air of gloom hung over the breakfast tables in Cavern Hole. Blind Simeon wrinkled his whiskers in disgust as he took his seat.

“Phew! Has somebeast moved the orchard compost heap into here, Father Abbot? he complained.

Saxtus prodded the mess on his plate glumly. “Evidently you havent heard of an old seagoing dish that Slipp our new cook has served up. Its called skilly an duff. Like to try some?

“Stick to plain honest bread, my friend, youll live longer, said Mother Mellus as she broke a fresh-baked farl and passed half to Simeon. “Dearie me, no wonder searats are so wicked and wild. Id be like that too if I had to live on a diet of the dreaded skilly an* duff!

Slipp forestalled further conversation by pushing in a trolley piled high with platters of his creation. The searat captain was quite proud of his newfound cooking skills. Clad in a clean white smock and a tall chefs hat several sizes too small for him, he swaggered up to a table. “Skilly an duff, thats the stuff tput a curl in yer whiskers, made by me own fair paws. Anybeast want some more?

Suddenly a lot of Redwallers left the tables, claiming that they felt the need for fresh fruit from the orchard. Ladle in paw, Slipp looked from the empty places to his few remaining victims left sitting at the main table.Fruit from the orchard? Thatll never put a back on ye like velvet an* a twinkle in yer eye. Skilly an duff, now thats a real brekkist for ye! Cmon, Father hAbbot, yew aint touched yores yet. Itll be gone cold. Ere, let ole Slipp freshen it up with some thats fresh cooked.

Saxtus averted his head from the foul-smelling mess that Slipp was piling onto the cold contents of his plate. “Youll excuse me asking, Slipp, but what do you put into this, er, skilly an duff? he asked. Slipp licked the ladle and winked. “Haharr, thats an ole seadogs secret; a bit o this an a touch o that, lashins of wild garlic, white dead nettle, some cleavers an just a smidgeon o dogwort.

Saxtus clapped a paw to his mouth and hurried from the table.

Slipp hooked a clawful of the steaming concoction from Saxtuss plate, straight into his mouth. “Wots wrong with im? Tastes fine fine.

Mellus s huge paw crashed down on the table. “Enough is enough! The only thing youve ever cooked up is roguish schemes. Clear this ... this ... garbage away, and bury it somewhere deep to let nature take care of it. Now!

Slipp drew himself up haughtily, about to protest when the badger seized him by one ear and shook him. “You are a cheat and a liar! Youve never cooked in your life! When youve cleared this lot up I want to see you out in the kitchens. Scrub all the pots and pans and spread rose-water round until every trace of skilly an* duff, sight or

smell, is gone!

“Yowowow, lemme go, stripedog! Ooch ouch!

Brothers Fingle and Mallen took over cooking duties, and a satisfactory lunch of summer salad, cheeses, and apple pie with meadowcreain brought the Abbey back onto an even keel. The day wore on, warm, sunny and still; bees droned lazily from flower to flower. Redwallers went on with their daily chores, tending crop and orchard, harvesting honey, reading and studying, or helping with the upkeep of Abbey buildings. Tranquillity was the keynote, with the high green mantle of Mossflower shading the outer walls on three sides, leaving the west ramparts open to sunny flatlands where larks sang and grasshoppers chirruped.

Toward mid-noon Blaggut put the finishing touches to a pair of boats he had made by halving an old cider barrel lengthways. The searat was proud of a previously unknown skill he had discovered that dayboatbuilding. He had sawed the barrel neatly from top to bottom, making two butt-ended little vessels. A cask lid cut in half provided two keels for balance. Inside the boats he wedged short, flat planks for seats. Two big ash staves served as masts, with a third, cut in half, completing the cross spars, from which hung twin, much-patched sails. They had done sterling service as tablecloths and were donated by Sister Sage. The mousebabe and Furrtil the molemaid scurried round the searats footpaws, squeaking excitedly.

“Which uns mine, Blackguts, sir?

“Hurr, theym bootiful ships!

“Can us ave rowers to row with?

“Oim callen moi ship ee Daffydill

“Mine be called Watermouseyl

Blaggut sat dow.n on the pond edge sipping cider that he had drained from the barrel into a bowl before construction began. The searat was as happy as the two Dib-buns.

“Haharr, mates, Im a boatbuilder! All me life Ive been called stoopid an clumsy an thick as two short planks. But I aint, I got clever paws, I kin make boats, good uns!

“Write our ships names on em, Blackguts, sir. Oh, please!

Blaggut had hoped they would not ask him this. “Er, well, mebbe Sister Sage oughter do that, shipmates. I never learned no writin, bein a searaer, carpenter, there wasnt no need fer such things. Aye, well ask the Sister. Sides, she probly kin write proper fancy; I bet good ole mouseladies like er does writin a lot. But old ard, mateys. Wot about our bargainyou know, the secret treasure you was gonna show me?

The mousebabe planted his paws on tiny, fat hips. “Nono, first we wanna sail, see if these ships work right!

Blaggut finished his cider. “Yore an ard master, mousebabe. Come on then, lets launch em.

The boats were an instant success. They sailed wonderfully on the slightest breeze and in the absence of any wind could be rowed easily with the paddles Blaggut had made. All the Abbey Dibbuns gathered at the ponds edge, anxious to take their turn being ferried about on the Abbey pond. Both mousebabe and mole-maid were in their element, sailing, paddling, and roaring orders.

“Hurr, youm sit yurr an ee sit thurr. Old on naow!

“Two atta time, ony two atta time. Whos next?

“Oill take ee round yon bullyrushers!

“Watch out for big fishes an pirates!

Blaggut lounged on the bank, proudly watching his two new boats on their maiden voyages. After a while, Slipp came shuffling wearily along and slumped down beside his former boatswain. “Enjoyin* yerself are yer, avin a good time? he asked.

“Aye thankee, Capn. See the boats I made fer my Dibbuns!

Slipp cast a weary eye over the two sleek little craft. “So thats ow you been fritterin the day away. I mighta known, you great lazy loaf ead!

Blaggut had not expected Slipp to make any nice comments on his achievements. “Buildin boats aint fritterin time away, Capn. Wot ave you been up to all day?

Slipp waved airily as if it were no big thing. “Oh, they made me ead cook, Im in charge of all the kitchens. Did yer taste my skilly an* duff at brekkfist?

“Aye, Capn. It was orrible. Yew make a better Capn than a cook. The bread was nice, though. Did ymake that?

Slipp was no stranger to fibbing. “Baked the bread meself, he lied glibly. “It was those Abbey mice who made the skilly an duff; they ignored me instructions. Blaggut leaned close to SHpps ear and whispered, “Capn, we dont ave to go untin fer booty tonight, so dont you worry about that black shadder we saw.

SHpp felt the hairs on his nape rise with fear. “Shurrup, yfool. Shut yer mouth! I tol* you never to mention that black shadow again long as you live. It didnt appen, dye hear me? Theres no such thing as black shadows. Anyow, why dont we ave to go lookin fer booty tonight?

Blaggut told his Captain all, from the boatbuilding to the oath he had taken with the Dibbuns. He smiled slyly at Slipp and winked. Slipp cuffed him roughly on the nose. “Ymean to tell me that those two Dibthings know where theres secret treasure idden, an yore sittin ere like a loungin lobster watchin em sail round a pond? “Bargains a bargain, Capn, said Blaggut, rubbing his nose tenderly. “They gotta try out their new boats. Besides, I got to stay ere an keep an eye on the liddle rascals in case one falls in.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel came strolling up and wagged an ear at Slipp curtly. “Cmon, Slippy ol rat, back to work, wot? Lots of sticky pots t be washed; theyve been making honey pudden an maple toffee apples. Sticks the pots n pans up frightfully, yknow. Mellus sent me, said if ydont come shell be down here an fetch you herself. Ydont want that, wot?

Blaggut stared nonplussed at his companion. “But, Capn, I thought you said you was the cook in charge?

Tarquin chuckled at the thought of Slipp ruling the kitchens. “Oh hes in charge all right, Lord of all the greasy dishwater. King of the pots n pans. Well, old thing, are you comin?

Slipp gnawed a sticky claw, his bravado shattered by the thought of the fearsome Mellus standing over him, inspecting each dish to see it was clean. He clung to Blaggut, whimpering, “Dont letim take me, mate. You wouldnt let them crooly use yer ole Capn as a galley slave, would yer?

“Leave the Capn ere, sir, Blaggut appealed to Tarquin. “Those young uns need watchin. Ive gotta take the molemaid an the mousebabe fer

their afternoon stroll. Ahoy there, you two, come on now.

Tarquin winked at Slipp. “Righto, but dont forget those pots and pans or Mellus will remind you with a ladle, wot?

The two Dibbuns held Blagguts paws as they guided him around the back of the main Abbey building. As they went, he questioned them. “You shore that its the real secret idden treasure of Redwalls hAbbey?

The mousebabe gave an exasperated sigh at Blagguts ignorance. “Phwaw! Course we sure. Its the mos se-cretest treasure in alia world, innit Furrtil?

The molemaid smiled and tapped her nose knowingly. “Yurr, that et be, an oanly usns know whurr et be buried.

At the southeast gable of the Abbey the mousebabe planted his back firmly against the wall and began striding out in measured steps, counting. Blaggut and Furrtil followed.

“One, two, three, five, seven, six, twennyfour, elev-enteen ...

The molemaid nodded her head in admiration. “Burr, oi wished oi knowed ow to count in numbers loik ee mousebaby do, eem tumble clever!

Blaggut watched the little figure striding boldly out.

“Twennyfifty, sixfortyeight, two again, leventy-twelve ...

“Bless me, eddications a wunnerful thing; look at im go!

The mousebabe halted at the southeast corner of the outer wall, and he pointed down.

“There, you has to dig now!

Blaggut looked at the spot. “Who dug the ole in the first place?

Furrtil pointed a digging claw at herself. “Oi did, zurr. Ho twurr aid wurk, oi tell ee!

Blaggut leaned up against the wall. “Yore a mole. Why cant you dig the treasure up?

The mousebabe looked at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. “Cos she messed up er frock diggin it inna first place. Dyou want to

get *er sended off t bed again, silly!

With a look of long suffering Blaggut knelt down to dig.

The black shadow fell over him.

Startled, he looked up in time to see the hooded figure on the walltop draw back out of sight. Grabbing the Dib-buns paws, die searat rushed them off across the Abbey grounds. Suddenly the quiet summer afternoon was laden with unspeakable dread for him.

The molemaid held on to her mobcap as he whisked them along. “Whurr be ee rushen usns off to, zurr?

“Save yer breath, little unkeep runnin!

“But wot about ee gurt secret treasure?

“Ferget it. Cmon, back to the pond.

The mousebabe broke away and sped off yelling, “Ahoy ahoy, back to our boats!

They made it back to the pond when the Joseph bell tolled out a single boom. Teatime. Trestles had been set up for a summer orchard tea. Strawberries and cream, toffee apples, yellow dandelion bread, and dark, fizzy elderberry cordial.

Tarquin placed a slab of white celery cheese on some dandelion bread, took a bite, chewed critically, ears flapping slowly, then washed it down with a beaker of the cordial. “First rate, top hole! All in order, compliments to the cook, couldnt ask for nicer, grade-one tuck!

“Keep talking. While youre spouting, you arent scoffing!

Tarquin wrinkled his nose at Sister Roses remark. “So beautiful, yet so cruel, marm. Pray be seated. Ill join you presently, if I may.

He turned and stalked to where Blaggut and Slipp were seated side by side, both scrubbed and wearing clean tunics. The hare wagged a warning paw at them. “Best behavior now, you chaps. Mind ymanners an dont go piggin everything in sight.

Me 1 his murmured quietly to Simeon, “Thats rich coming from Woodsorrel the walloper; dont go pigging everything in sight. Did you hear him?

“A case of glutton shall speak unto glutton, Id say! Simeon smiled as he nodded.

Saxtus rang his table bell and everybeast folded paws and lowered their eyes. Brother Mallen nudged the two searats to do likewise. Then Father Abbot of Redwall said grace.

“Thanks to seasons, praise the fates,

For this peace within our gates.

Welcome, friends, who gladly toil,

In our fertile Redwall soil.

May we never famine fear,

Mid the summers goodness here.

Mother Mellus inspected the mousebabes paws approvingly. “My, my, these are very clean indeed!

Mousebabe rolled his eyes skyward, impatient to be eating. “Hmm, should be clean paws; losed me paddle, an I been rowin my ship rounda pond wiv them.

Slipp kicked Blaggut under the table. “Well, wheres the treasure, did yer get it? he whispered.

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, Blaggut applied himself to the business of strawberries and cream. “Uh uh, Capn, sorry. You told me never tmention it as long as I lives.

“Never tmention wot? Tell me! said Slipp, and he bit a slice of cheese savagely.

Blaggut chose a strawberry, dipping it in the rich golden-tinged cream. It vanished into his mouth. “Mmmm, wunnerful! No, Capn, Im only obeyin orders. You told me never to mention that black shadder as long as I lives, so I cant tell yer.

Slipp felt the hair rise at the nape of his neck again. “Black shadow, was the black shadow there? he croaked.

Blaggut sorted through his bowl of strawberries until he found the biggest of all. “Cant tell yer, Capn. You said black shadders dont appen an I was to ferget it all, so Im fergettin it, Capn!

Slipp was trying hard to keep his claws away from Blagguts obstinate neck. He tried another ploy. “Yore right, mate. Dont mention that other shadow thing; just tell me about the treasure, or the place its buried in.

Blaggut piled cream onto his big strawberry until it was completely covered and held it near his mouth. “ Ang on a tick, Capn. Glopp! Mmmff, mmmff!

The infuriated Slipp had to sit waiting while his former boatswain munched away with a look of delight pasted on his oafish face. Blaggut finished and licked the cream from his lips. “Aaahhh, never ad more prime vittles in me life! Oh, now, where was I? The secret treasure of Redwall hAbbey, aye, thats where I was. Its buried at the corner of the southeast wall, eleventynine steps from thebuildin itself ...

“Eleventynine steps ysay? The Captain managed to keep a straight face.

“Aye, thats ow the mouseybabe measured it out, an that liddle cove knows ow to count, take my affydavit on it. I knows the hexact spot where it lies. Truth to tell, I was startin* to dig it up when ... Oho, but I promised I wouldnt mention that. Beggin yer pardon, Capn.

Slipp relaxed and began searching his own bowl for big strawberries to dip in the cream. “Ive got it now, he said. “Yore tellin me that you knows where the treasure is buried, the very spot. Now, you was just goin tdig it up when wot we vowed never to mention again came an scared you off, is that right?

Blaggut poured himself some cordial, watching it fizz.

“Eddications a great thing, Capn. Ow do they put the liddle bubbles in this grog? Yowch! I told you I knows where the treasure lies, Capn, no need ter keep kickin me!

Further conversation was halted by the tinkle of the Abbots bell. A smile hovered about the face of Saxtus as he made his announcement.

“Attention, friends, tonight at dusk we will gather by the pond for a concert. Everybeast is allowed to take part, but I beg you to keep any songs and dances brief, so that all may have a chance to perform. There will be a number of prizes, the main one being a silver cup donated by Mellus. Dibbuns can stay up late to take part. Thank you!

There was a rousing cheer from the Redwallers, then they left the tables to go about any remaining chores, discussing with one another what they would do at the concert.

Slipp murmured out of the corner of his mouth to Blag-gut, “Perfect! While theyre singin an jiggin, well be diggin the treasure up.

Blaggut was about to raise an objection when a large, black shadow fell over them both. He covered his face with both paws and tried to hide beneath the table, but it was only Mellus.

“Slipp, havent you got work to finish in the kitchens? she asked. “Blaggut, come from under that table; youll be needed to gather wood for the fire by the pond. Come on you two, look lively or you wont get a chance to do your bit at the concert this evening.

Blaggut and Slipp looked at each other nonplussed. “Do our bit? groaned Slipp.

The searat Captain snorted as he gathered up dishes. “Huh, the only bit well be doin is robbin the treasure from this place an makin a run fer it, an tis woe betide anybeast who gets in the way!

# 27

In the cavern under Castle Floret, Egbert the Scholar caught hold of the huge badgers paws and tried to break its hold on Mariel. The mousemaid was totally helpless in the grip of the great beast. Starbursts and colored lights danced in front of her vision, and the breath was forced from her body as the maddened creature tightened its grip. Egberts voice sounded thin and hollow in the cavern as he called out, “Help me, Rudd, help me! Shes a friend!

An otter bounded out of the mist. He stood before the badger and made a swift motion with a javelin he was carrying. Instantly the badger dropped Mariel, who fell to the rocky floor gasping for breath. Egbert ministered to Mariel as he spoke soothingly to the badger.

“This is our friend Marielshe will not harm us, Muta. She is an enemy of Foxwolf; you and Rudd can help her.

The otter dipped a beaker into a pool among the rocks and, holding it to the mousemaids lips, he allowed her to drink.

Aside from a few aching ribs, Mariel was not badly injured. She regained her breath and sat among the rocks with Egbert. The badger and the otter sat a short distance away. She watched them. Both were completely still, as if awaiting an order from Egbert. The mousemaid could not help but notice the dreadful scars tracing the fur of both creatures. Egbert explained their story.

“They staggered in here one night, virtually ripped to pieces and nearly dead. I took care of them both. It was no easy task. I learned most of my healing skills from books and scrolls, and luckily they worked, though not completelyI cannot heal minds. It was Nagru and his horde who tried to kill themsee the way they bare their teeth at the mention of his name. The badger I know is called Muta; she used to be nursemaid to the son of Gael, here at Floret. I do not know the otter, so I call him Rudd. Strange, but neither beast talks, nor do they appear to have any memory of things that went on before I found them here that night. They are both mighty warriors. I think Muta has taken the way of the berserkI have read of badgers being like this; nobeast can stop them when a bloodlust is upon them. Rudd has become like her.

Mariel interrupted Egbert. “I think I know more about these two than

you do, friend. The otter is called Rab Streambattle. I was told about them at the dwelling of Furpp the mole; they were believed to be dead, both killed when Serena and Truffen made their escape. I will tell you the full story when we get time. Meanwhile, let me try something.

Mariel approached the two silent beasts, as they sat motionless. The mousemaid spoke first to Muta and then to Rab, repeating the names of their loved ones.

“Muta, I come from Gael, I have news of Serena and the little Truffen. They are safe. Rab, you are alive, yet Iris thinks you are dead. Your mate, Iris!

There was no response. The two battle-scarred warriors stared blankly at Mariel as if she were talking in a strange language. Egbert drew her aside.

“It is no use, he said. “I have tried similar things with them. Whatever was done to those two has changed them; they are inseparable and live only to kill their enemies.

Mariel felt a great wave of pity for the two dumb beasts. She, too, had known what it was to be like them; seasons before she came to Redwall a similar thing had happened to her. She clasped their paws in hersMutas, huge and forbidding, Rabs, sinewy and dangerous.

“Listen, friends, she said, earnestly, “I am Mariel of Redwall. Together we will rid Southsward of Urgan Na-gru and his scum; this I promise you! Egbert, where is the gatehouse that works the drawbridge?

The scholarly mole squinted over his glasses. “Follow me, but be careful!

Greenbeck bowed low as Gael Squirrelking materialized out of the mist to meet the rescuers on the plateau.

“Your Majesty, fates be thanked!

Gael clasped Greenbecks paw saying, “Do not bow to a fool like me. There are others followingsend your scouts to guide them here.

On Greenbecks order, two otters, Ruckal and Cress-eye, trotted off into the rain-spattering mists and returned leading Meldrum and Dandin. Silvamord had given up searching for Marie). She sat kicking her paws on a window ledge, shaking her head in mock pity at Nagru.

“What are you going to do, mighty conquerortear the castle apart to find one mousemaid? Shes long gone!

The Foxwolf had been roaring orders, tearing down wall hangings, smashing doors, and generally abusing his searchers. With his chest heaving from exertion, he slumped down and sat on the cold stone floor.

“Catch them as they swing into the battlements, he sneered. “That wasnt my idea; that was your bright scheme, vixen!

Wetchops and Mingol came scurrying up from opposite ends of the corridor. Before they could speak, Silvamord pointed at Mingol. “You first, whats your good news?

The rat shuffled nervously, keeping out of range of Na-gru. “The prisoners have all escaped, Sire. We finally broke into the attic of the tower, but there was nobeast there!

“Leave them up there in the rain; Ill deal with them tomorrow after a good sleep, said Silvamord, mimicking Nagrus voice. “Thats what you saidSire!

Nagru shot her a swift, murderous glare before turning his attention to Wetchops. “Well, what have you got to say for yourself? Speak!

“Sire, the drawbridge is being attacked!

“By who?

“Dunno, Siretoo much rain an mist outside, but theyre firm arrows, throwin lances an slingstones.

Silvamord eased herself off the window ledge. “Well, theyre wasting their time, she said. “That drawbridge gate wont budge for arrows or stones and lances. I wonder what theyre really up to?

Nagru stood up slowly, saying, “A diversion, maybe. What dyou think?

Silvamord raised her eyebrows approvingly. “I think youre right, for once. Better double the guards on the walls and in the turrets; they may try a surprise attack from another part of the valley.

Iris loosed an arrow off into the mist. She heard it thud into the drawbridge gate.

Troutlad fitted a shaft to his bowstring. “Rains gone off, he said. “But I think were wastin arrows and lances here. That keep door is too sturdy.

“Oh, I dont know, old chap, came a voice from in front of them. “You mayve kept em off our backs while we escaped!

Greenbecks party emerged from the mist, Dandin, Meldrum, and Gael striding along with them. Iris waved her bow. “Cease fire! Dandin, Meldrum, welcome! Your Majesty!

Egbert emerged from a dark tunnel and held out a cautionary paw to his friends. “Thats as close as I can get you by hidden ways, he said.

They came out into a long hallway broken in parts by broad flights of steps. Mariel let the wall tapestry drop back into place across the tunnel mouth. “Which way to the gatehouse, Egbert? she asked.

The mole scholar pointed. “As far as you can go, through the banqueting chamber, down another flight of stairs and first left. Er, its not that Im afraid or anything, but Im a scholar, not a warriorwouldnt I be in the way?

Mariel patted the moles paw understandingly. “Of course, youd be a liability if fighting broke out; wed have to look out for you. Besides, you must have other business to attend to.

Egbert pushed aside the tapestry that hid the tunnel. “Thank you, Mariel. Im sure Ill be around should you need me.

Muta and Rab waved good-bye as Mariel called softly, “Good luck and fortune go with you, Egbert the Scholar!

The mole poked his head back around the tapestry. “Through extensive research, I have found that luck and fortune have little to do with anything. It is brains like mine and a warrior mentality like yours, combined with the element of surprise, that invariably win the day!

The three warriors trod lightly down the first flight of steps, looking from left to right, ready for anything. Mariel peeked through a partially opened door and saw horde-rats sleeping on a straw-littered floor, a chamber full of them. Without a word to her berserk companions she gently removed a spear from the claws of a slumbering rat. Closing the door, the mo use maid slid the spearhaft through the ring in the latch, effectively imprisoning the sleepers in

their own barracks. Muta looked at her ques-tioningly. Mariel smiled. “Its nothing, just making sure were not followed.

Voices came from farther down the darkened hallway. “Well, you go an tell Nagru that you aint stannin out on no walls all night. Im not!

“But I dont ave a cloak like you. Spose its still rainin, Ill catch me death of cold out there!

“Aye, mate, and youll catch yer death a lot faster if you tell Foxwolf that you dont fancy obeyin his orders!

“Huh, if it wasnt for those mangy escaped prisoners wed be in our barracks n The rat never finished the sentence he was speaking; neither he nor his companion would ever have to worry about going out on guard again. Muta and Rab carried on down the next flight of stairs as if nothing had happened. Mariel took a curved sword from one of the dead rats and hastened to catch up with the silent slayers.

The banqueting chamber had a torch alight on one wall. The three warriors moved through, silent as the flickering shadows that played over tables and chairs.

Six horderats were seated round a table in the gatehouse playing a game with three shells and an acorn. A flagon of wine stood on the table, a prize for the winner. A draft flickered around the wall torches as the door swung open. One rat looked up and squealed with fright at the sight of Mariel and her two silent allies entering the room. Muta charged, her relentless energy taking her crashing into the nearest two rats, then all became confusion.

The table went crashing end over end, knocking the wall torches from their sconces and plunging the gatehouse into darkness. In the onslaught, amid the screaming, clattering, grunting, and banging, five of the rats met their doom. One rat, more nimble than the rest, slipped by Rab. He fled through the doorway and up the stairs before any-beast could stop him. Mariel struggled with the otter in the doorway as he tried to give chase. “No, Rab, leave the rat; weve got what we wantthe gatehouse is ours! Slamming the door and securing it, the mousemaid found the torches and blew on them until they flared into light. A huge wooden drum with turning handles attached and a crude block brake held the thick ropes that controlled the drawbridge. Muta finished tipping the last of the slain enemies from the gatehouse window, smiling grimly as the carcasses hit the moat below with a splash. Taking Muriels sword, the badger swung it high over the coils

of rope wound around the drum, ready to slice them through to lower the bridge. Mariel shook her head. “No need for that, my friend. We control the drawbridge nowbesides, the time may arrive when well need to have it closed!

Silvamord was frightened; Nagru was furious. They had both listened to the terrified recitation of the rat who had escaped alive from the gatehouse. The Foxwolf watched sunny daylight dispersing the valley mist from his chamber window, then banged the ledge so hard that his paw hurt. “They double-bluffed us! So that was how their decoy worked, fooling us into thinking they were attacking the drawbridge, drawing our guards away onto the walltops to forestall another trick, when all the time they really were attacking the drawbridge, from the inside! Now they have control over our very front door! Come on, vixen, wheres all your crafty ideas? Why are you sitting there trembling like a pile of frogspawn?

Silvamord was not looking at Nagru. She stared at the wall blankly, her voice atremble as she said, “The badger and the otter, you couldnt have killed them right; theyve come back from the dead, and theyre inside this place now!

The Urgan Nagru shook his head until the teeth of the wolfskull rattled.! cant believe those two arent dead. We left them like pincushions, they were ripped to bits ...

A loud bump from below interrupted him. It startled Silvamord from her trance, and she dashed to the window. “Theyve lowered the drawbridge!

Watching from the wooded slopes on the opposite valley side, Dandins sharp eyes caught sight of a small figure in the gatehouse window. It was gone in a second, but almost at once the drawbridge fell open and spanned the moat. He turned to Iris, his eyes shining happily. “Now I know where Mariel isin the gatehouse! Theres only one warriormaid couldve pulled off a trick like that. Haha, escapings not good enough for that one; shes got to capture the drawbridge as well!

Me Id rum tore himself away from the impromptu breakfast he had scrounged, “Brains, eh, that gel will control her own regiment one day, mark m words. Righto, up on ypaws, you lot, weve got to jolly well help her!

Amid the jubilation it was left for Iris to provide the voice of reason. “Hold hard, you two. Were only a small rescue party. I dont think

youve grasped just how large the Foxwolfs horde is. Wed be committing suicide trying to attack Floret, even with the drawbridge down.

Meldrum stroked berry stains from his mustachios. “Youre right, of course, he admitted. “So, what action dyou propose we take? Cant leave the brave mousey there on her own t be winkled out an slain by those foul creatures, can we?

Gael had been listening to the conversation. An idea was forming in the Squirrelkings mind. “I suggest that you send word to Mariel telling her we are here. If you stay in the valley and harass the foe to keep their attention off Mariel, it will go a long way toward helping her. Meanwhile, I will go to Furpps dwelling, and from there I must try to raise up the whole of Southsward in arms to march upon Floret. Mariel has opened up a golden opportunity for us; the time is ripe. I think we will never get a better chance to rid the land of Foxwolf and his horde. The sooner we strike the better!

Mariel and her two silent friends had shared the flagon of wine and eaten what small amount of food there was to be had in the gatehouse. Rats had gathered on the stairs outside, but so far they had made no move to try to recapture the room. Nagru knew that he would only lose valuable hordebeasts by trying to charge the door, for in such a small space the badger and the otter could hold the doorway against all comers. The mousemaid was making herself a new Gullwhacker with a thick length of spare drawbridge rope; she sat at the window working at the complicated knots known only to herself. The valley was fresh and green under bright morning sun, deceptively peaceful and calm. The mousemaids quick eyes took in a slight movement on the wooded slope opposite. “Look, Muta, Rabsee, we have friends close by! she cried.

The badger and the otter joined her at the window. Mariel gave out a piercing whistle, swinging her halfcompleted Gullwhacker out of the open window. “If they cant hear me, maybe theyll see this rope.

A moment later she glimpsed a small figure climbing to the lower branches of a sycamore. It was waving what appeared to be a long dagger. The mousemaid waved back saying, “Thats got to be Dandin. I cant see properly from here, but Ill wager anything its him!

Dandin climbed down from his perch to where Meld-rum and Iris were waiting.

“Aye, thats my Mariel, all right, he said. “Shes got herself a new Gullwhacker. Do you think you could put an arrow through that window, Iris?

The otter shouldered her bow and quiver busily. “Get me close enough and I know I can, third shot!

As Mariel watched the three figures duck and weave across the valley floor, she commentated on their movements to Muta and Rab. “Here they come; theres three of them. I think one is Meldrum, but I cant be sure. Theyre holding a great chunk of bark in front of them as a shield. They must have been sighted by Nagrus ratsarrows are being shot at them, one or two have struck the bark shield, but theyre still coming forward. Oh come on, come on, friends!

Meldrum the Magnificent pulled his twitching ears in below the top of the bark. “The blighters are shootin at us; nearly had my bally ears pierced just then. Much further tgo, chaps?

Dandin held tight to the sheet of bark, sidestepping as an arrow thudded into the earth close to his paw. “What dyou think, Iris, is this far enough? he asked.

The otter squinted through a knothole at the castle. “This will do. Here goes number one!

She ran from behind die shield, a shaft already strung tightly on her bowstring. Taking quick aim, Iris fired and nipped uuck behind the shield as a volley of arrows zipped from the battlements at her.

“Too high, she said. “It hit the stones above the gatehouse window, but Mariel knows what were up to now. Shes pulled back out of sight and put a table upright in the window space. Right, here goes my second shotit wont hit; its only a rangefinder.

Notching another arrow on her string, the otter leaped out and fired. She watched the arrow in flight for a brief moment before diving back under cover. “Thought sotoo low! Give me the arrow with the message tied to it, Dandin. Ive got the range now.

Fitting the third arrow to her bow, Iris waited a moment as a hail of arrows passed overhead.

“One ... Two ... Now!

She sprang into the open, bowstring taut against her cheek, and

squinting one eye along the arrow she released it.

Ssssst thunk!

Muta and Rab stood guarding the door against any sudden attack as Mariel tugged at the arrow buried in the tabletop. “Whew, whoever shot that one knew what they were doing! she said, admiringly.

Nagru and Silvamord had both been in line with the rats on the battlements, shooting arrows for all they were worth. The Foxwolf put aside his bow as the three figures retreated behind their shield.

“Stop shooting, he ordered. “Theyre out of range now. All down to the drawbridge. Come on, you fumblepawed lot, shift yourselves!

A big gray rat named Crutch was in charge of the ranks that stood six deep blocking the open drawbridge entrance. He saluted Nagru smartly. “All quiet here, Lord. No sign of any attack yet.

The Foxwolf glanced up at the gatehouse window high above. “It will come, though. Crutch, I want this entrance guarded night and day. No lapsesstay alert. Those three in the gatehouse have received a message from their friends.

Mariel unrolled the thin strip of cloth from around the arrowshaft and read aloud the charcoal scrawl to the badger and the otter. “Hold gatehouse long as you can. Gael gone to raise an army. It is war!

# 28

Pearl Queen skimmed over the summer seas like a great bird, ever southward, cutting white-crested rollers, with webs of sunlit water patterns racing along her hull above the seashadows. Finnbarr and Joseph leaned over the stern rail, watching their vessels creamy wake trail out until it merged with the distant main. The sea otter squinted at the feathery clouds being chased across the sky by playful breezes.

“Were makin good headway, Joseph. Lets ope our luck stays with us, mate, he said.

The Bellmaker could not resist smiling at this remark. “Luck? Weve been holed by rocks, attacked by toads, fought off a shark, lost our rudder, had a mast snapped off like a twig, and been chased by a double-crewed shipload of searats, and thats besides losing the Roaringburn current that was supposed to take us to Southsward. What more luck do we need, you puddle-headed old seadog?

Finnbarr threw a tattooed paw about the Bellmakers shoulders, hugging him fondly.

“Yew mizzuble ole bellbonger, I never said twas goin t be easy, did I? We aint sittin on the bottom o the briny with a sunken ship, thats lucky. Mayaps those three liddle orphans we took aboard at the island are our lucky charms, eh?

Joseph turned and watched the three young ones. They were playing skip the rope on the hatch covers with Rufe, Durry, and Patch. “Poor little mites, they could do with a bit of luck themselves. Were the only ones theyve got left in this world now. Benjy will be useful to us; he knows Southsward.

“Wot about the other two young coves? Finnbarr nodded toward Wincey and Figgs.

“Fortunately they have no memory of Southsward, or if they do, its never mentioned. From what Benjy told me it was a terrible place to be once the creature called Foxwolf came there. He rules the land by terror; theres none to stand against him and his rat horde. The Urgan Nagru is his other name, and he has a mate called Sil-vamord. Benjys not sure whether theyre wolves or foxes. They murdered and tricked their way into powerhave you ever heard of them, Finn?

The sea otter touched his twin sword hilts ominously. “No, but when we meet Im sure the pleasure!! be all mine, matey. Ive alms been a freebeast, an I never could take to tyrants an conquerors, specially those whod make orphans of liddle uns. Bad fortune to em says I, an Im the beast wholl bring it to em!

Figgs was not built for rope skipping. She attached herself to Rosie, knowing that the hare was a good food provider.

“Figgs wants pudden, Rosie, more pudden!

Rosie Woodsorrel gave a gusty whoop. “Whoohaha-hooh! I say, what a good idea, Figgs. So do I. Come on, old scout, lets chuck those shrews out the galley and see what we can jolly well cook up between us, wot?

Foremole stumped about opening supply lockers and searching the galley cupboards gloomily. “Baint much vittles left, miz Rose; wem shouldve taked on more supplies at ee island. Burr, soon usns be a drinken ee sea an cooken ee sails furr zoop!

Rosie frowned as she turned a few withered apples out of a drawer. “Well lack a day, you mean theres no tucker left?

Log-a-Log crawled out of an empty locker saying, “Theres a bit, but not much. Ive just been sounding the water casks; were going to have to ration the drinking water from now on. If we dont sight land soon I think fish would be a good idea, eh, Foremole?

“Burr, nay zurr Log, wem ad one gurt fish aboard, that wurr enuff furr oi, thankee!

Figgs followed Rosie about, throwing her paws in the air and repeating over and over, “Lack a day, no tuckers left, lack a day!

A meeting of the crew was called. Joseph faced them across a small heap of supplies, all that was left aboard Pearl Queen. The Bellmakers face was grave as he addressed the assembly.

“This is the sum total of our food, and from now on the water is rationed. We must go carefully.

Rosie watched Figgs toddling about repeating her lament: “Lack a day, no tuckers left, no tucker, lack a day!

The kindly hare gathered the little otter to her. “Well, Im not really

hungry, doncha know. Give my share to young Figgs here.

Finnbarr shook his head saying, “O no, marm, an all you others who volunteered tgive their vittles tthe young uns. No, it cant be done. Wed all starve an theyd be left alone agin. Everybeast must take their rations an eat em tkeep up strength. Thats an order!

Lookouts were posted in the rigging to watch out for land. Benjy sat up on the bowsprit with Durry, Rufe, and Patch. They scanned the horizon constantly with no success. Mid-noon became hot, and the breeze dropped until Pearl Queen was practically lying becalmed. Joseph filled a water dipper from a pail to give the sea otter his ration.

“Looks like that luck you were talking about has run out, he said.

Finnbarr sipped steadily, his single eye roving the sea. “Keep yer chin up, Bellmaker. Bit o a breeze is all we needs to shift us on tfresh fortune.

Benjy was the youngest of the four who sat on the bowsprit. He stared unhappily at the empty wastes of water stretching as far as his eye could see.

“Patch, whatll happen if we dont get food? he asked. The shrew was the eldest by a season. He winked at Durry, saying, “If we dont get food, well probly have to eat one o the crew. Thats what they do at sea, aint it, mates?

Durry and Rufe went along with the joke. “Aye, thats right. Wonder who Mr. Finnbarr will pick to cook for supper tonight?

Benjy stood up, paws clenched. “Hed better not choose Wincey or Figgs!

“Nah, theyre too liddle. Patch dismissed the idea airily. “Us young uns are safe; there aint enough on us tmake a decent pan o soup.

Benjy was completely taken in; wide-eyed, he asked, “Does that mean well have to eat one of the big uns? Hope its not Mr. Joseph; I like him!

Rufe thought for a moment. “Hmm, Foremole might taste all right, or maybe one of the shrewsLog-a-Log, hes plump enough.

“I couldnt eat them, theyre nice creatures! Benjy said, horrified.

Rosie and Figgs were parading round the deck. Rosie was so amused by the little ottermaid that she had joined her in the game. They both went about waving their paws, calling aloud together, “Lack a day, no tucker, tuckers gone, lack a day!

Passing by the four on the bowsprit, Rosie gave them a wave. “Toodle pip, chaps! Whew, this is hot work. Lack a day ...

Patch cast a sly glance at Rosie and rubbed his paws gleefully. “At least we wouldnt have to put up with Mrs. Woodsorrel laughin all the time, he said.

Rufe had not really taken part in the grisly joke, and now, unable to stand any more of it, he put a comforting paw around Benjy. “Dont worry, mate, therell be no-beast cooked aboard this ship. Huh, Id like to see anyone try to eat miz Rosie!

Figgs heard the remark and thought it was the signal for a new game. She grabbed the hares footpaw, crying, “Lack a day, eat miz Rosie, lack a day!

Rosie Woodsorrel was highly amused, at first. “Whoo-hoohahahooh! I say, thats a good un young Figgs, eat miz Rosie, wot? Yowch, ylittle villainshe bit me!

The four youngsters nearly fell off the bowsprit laughing. Benjy stood up and grasped a rope to steady himself. When the laughter subsided, he pointed west.

“Look, whats that? The waters all ripply out there.

In a trice Finnbarr was across the deck and up on the bowsprit alongside the squirrel. “Show me, Benjy, mate?

“There, see, Mr. Finnbarr, the sun glitters on it!

“Aye, I sees it, messmate. Joseph! Bring that tiller about; it could be a shoal of small fishes. You young uns, go an elp Log-a-Log rig up some nets. Mebbe our luck is back. Well done, Benjy!

Joseph and Log-a-Log watched the strange rippling water as Pearl Queen sailed toward it. The shrew Chieftain was plainly puzzled. “Never seen nothin like that before. Hope its not rocks under the surface or anythin dangerous. What dyou spose it is, Joseph?

“I dont know enough about the sea to say, friend. It certainly is odd,

though. Our best bet is to follow orders and trust Finnbarr. Are the nets ready?

“Aye, Ive posted Patch an the rest at the stern. Well do a spot of trawling if it is small fish.

Figgs had given up trying to eat Rosie. Now she sat on the hares shoulders, gazing out over the flurrying, rippling strip of sea that came out of nowhere and vanished into the distance. It was about twenty boatlengths wide.

The nets were cast over as soon as Pearl Queen entered the disturbed patch of water. Finnbarr Galedeep hung over the stern peering into the meshes at the gray, wriggling swarms trapped in them. Pulling himself back on deck, he clapped Log-a-Logs back with a paw that was as hearty as it was heavy, and shouted, “Shrimp! We sailed into shoals of shrimp!

A cheer went up from the crew. Rosie and Figgs headed swiftly for the galley. “Whoohahahooh! Dyou hear that Figgs? Shrimp! Now, Im sure I spotted some mushrooms and spring onions. Aha, leeks! Its shrimp stew all round for tea, what dyou say, Figgs?

“Thrimps? Lack a day, tucker gone, Figgs want thrimps!

Finnbarr helped the crew pull in the nets that bulged with gray, wriggling shrimps. “Haharr, theyll soon be all pink an tender when they gits cooked, the sea otter chortled. “I wonder, is there any pepper about? Great seasons, theres a dish twarm the cockles of yer eart, shrimp stew with hotroot pepper aplenty. Ahoy there, Bandle, steer us out o this lot now, we got enough!

A panicked cry rang out from the shrew at the tiller. “I cant hold er, Finnbarr. Were bein pulled into the ripplin water. I cant get er out!

Finnbarr dropped the nets and dashed to the tiller. “Give it ere, mate. This ship aint goin nowhere I dont want it to. Come over, Pearll The sea otter fought with all his strength against the tiller, trying to get the vessel back into calm seas.

Joseph strolled up and stood grinning at him. Finnbarr Galedeeps face was a picture of disbelief. “Joseph, what ails yer, matey? Dont stan there grinnin like a witless woodypecker; lend a paw ere an quick!

The Bellmaker shook his grizzled head saying, “Seems like your luck is back, Finn, you old wavedog. Shrimp stew for supper, and youve

found Roaringburn again.

The sea otters jaw dropped in amazement. “Roarin1-burn?

Joseph flung out a paw at the rippling waters. “Aye, Roaringbura. Look at the speed were traveling, and headed due south, too. What else could it be?

Finnbarr gave over trying to control the tiller; he put it on a rope holder, due south. “Well, swoggle me whiskers an rot me rudder, if I aint a bottle-nosed son of a barnacle. Roarinburn! Come ere, young Wincey, an give yer ole uncle Finn a great big kiss fer more luck!

Wincey obliged, then ran off scrubbing at her lips. “Phtooh! Sea otters whiskers, yukk, tough an salty!

As evening fell, Rosie wiped a paw across her brow, weary of serving up helpings of Figg n Rosie shrimp-stew. She filled Foremoles bowl saying, “Mercy me, Figgs, how many more to come?

The tiny ottermaid was seated on a stool, helping out. She glared at a shrew who was shuffling in in a guilty manner. “Lack a day, Figgs seen you afore, two timesno more fyou! Mercy me, lots more wants more, miz Rosie.

Figgs was a proper little tyrant. She rapped Finnbarr with a ladle as he held out his bowl. “None fyou til you singasong. Figgs wants a song!

The sea otter shook his ottercordion at her. “If you wasnt so lucky Id a cooked ye along with those shrimps, young Figgs.

Figgs narrowed her eyes and brandished the ladle. “I cook you if you dont singasong, young Finnbars!

Finnbarr Galedeep riffled off a jaunty chord. “Im too young t be cooked. Ill sing for ye, Figgs.

Pearl Queen sped south into the night with the merry strains of singing hovering in her wake. The small galley was packed with crew, firelight from the stove flickering on their faces as they ate supper and listened to Finnbarrs song.

“Well there aint a dish in all the world,

As good as ole shrimp stew,

An this is the best Ive ever ad,

An Ive ad quite a few,

You kin keep yore big sea biscuits,

That duff an* skilly too,

Ill scrape me bowl an lick me spoon,

An sing to you by the light o the moon,

Theres better days a comin soon,

But none quite like tonight!

It was still dark when Wincey shook Joseph. He sat up on the hatch covers rubbing sleep from his eyes. “Whats the matter, little one? he asked.

“The ships stopped, Joseph. The Bellmaker sat quite still, holding his head to one side as he listened for the familiar noise of rigging, sail, and wind. Taking Winceys paw he rose. “Youre right, the ship has stopped. I wonder why?

Together they made their way up to the prow. Joseph f lifted her onto the bowsprit as he peered over the forard end. The Pearl Queen lay in shallow water, nosed deep into a broad sandbank. To the west the Roaringburn current could be seen, running off into a distant arc. A movement close by caused Joseph to turnit was Finnbarr.

“Looks like the current dont want us no more, matey. Shes drifted us off on to this ere sandbank; weve run out oluck again.

Joseph lifted Wincey down. “Go and get Benjy, little maid, and bring him here, quickly. Hold hard a moment, Finn. I think our luck may still be running good.

Benjy came pattering along paw in paw with Wincey. Joseph boosted him up so he could see over the rail. “Tell me, Benjy, these sandbanks, those little islands yonder and that shoreline behind them, do you recognize them?

The young squirrel nodded vigorously and spoke only one wordSouthsward.

Joseph lowered him to the deck. “Thats what I thought. Ive seen this coast once before from the deck of a ship some seasons ago, though Ive never been ashore here. As soon as I saw it, I had a feeling inside

that this was Southsward. We made it, Finnbarr!

The Bellmaker and the sea otter shook paws firmly.

Dawn came gently. A slight inshore mist lifting under the suns warmth revealed a verdant coast fringed with silver sand and backed by luxuriant woodland. As the last of the ships food and water was issued for breakfast, Log-a-Log joined Finnbarr and Joseph on the forecastle. Below on the hatch covers, Pearl Queens crew sat waiting for orders. Finnbarr gestured in the direction of land.

“Thats Southsward, mates, the place we set out tfind, he said. “It might look peaceable right now, but dont let that fool ye. First we got to git ole Pearl Queen on an even keel in a safe cove; we kin manage that with a bit o tuggin an shovin when yve finished yer vittles. Joseph.

The Bellmaker stood forward to speak his piece. “Then we choose our weapons and strike inland. No cooking fires, and sentries and lookouts at all times. Listen to me carefullyif you dont it may cost you your life. Benjy knows this country, and he will be our guide. Log-a-Log, have your Guosim protect our sides and rear wherever we go. Patch, Durry, Rufe, you will scout ahead with Benjy. Take care of him; only he knows the way.

“Rosie, you and Foremole will be in charge of the armorymake sure everybeast is kitted out with the weapons that suit them best. If what Benjy has told me is correct, we are up against a large horde, far larger than we could ever imagine facing. So we must act as a guerrilla unit, hit and run all the time, and weaken the enemy by chipping away at their numbers. Most of you know Mariel and Dandin. We are searching for them, so look before you loose arrows or slingstones. I have my own ideas where we will find my daughter and her friendright in the middle of any trouble we come across, so be prepared. Log-a-Log, have you anything to add?

The shrew Chieftain drew his short rapier and showed it, blade foremost, to his tribe. “Guosim, you know how to use these, swift and quiet. Protect our friends at all times and make them proud to fight by your side in battle.

It took half the morning to pry Pearl Queen off the sand-bank. The crew strove, waist deep in seawater, levering and using log rollers. Once the ship was back afloat she was towed on two stout ropes by the crew. Panting and struggling they pulled her through the shallows

to a wooded cove. There she was made fast to three trees on slacked ropes that allowed room for the tides rise and fall.

The afternoon was taken up with the issue of weapons. Rosie Woodsorrel tested would-be archers before giving them bows and arrows. She had a good eye for slingers, javelin throwers, and spearbeasts, too. Besides their chosen weapon every crew member was given a knife or sword from the searats well-stocked armory. Wincey, Benjy, and Figgs, accompanied by Durry, Rufe, and Patch, collected buckets of hard, round, sea-washed pebbles from the tideline for slingstones.

Evening shades fell as the sun started to dip below the western sea. Joseph stood on the cove bank with his little army, watching Finnbarr say good-bye to his ship. The sea otter had personally checked that all the sails were reefed tightly under their mast spars; every piece of rigging he inspected, carefully coiling each rope and line. After battening down the hatches and securing galley and cabin doors, he leaped ashore.

“Take a good rest, Queen, he said. “Yve earned it. Well see yer when we gets back off this trip if our luck stays with us. All the crew raised their weapons in a salute to the good ship they had come to love so well.

Then they turned inland to whatever fate and fortune would bring them. Death or victory.

# 29

Warm dusk stole through the twilight at the ponds edge in Redwall Abbeys grounds; moths fluttered softly over shimmering firelight reflections upon the still waters. Scarlet and gold flames flickered upward from the fire, their light forming a cave in the encroaching dark of night Oak Tom and his pretty wife, Treerose, had temporarily deserted their Mossflower seclusion to be at the festivities. Tom tended the fire while Treerose supervised the roasting of wheat ears.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel was in fine form. He had taken command of his leveret family, who were laying out the food. “You there, thingummy, stop paddlin in the water an give y* sister some assistance to fill up the platesand wipe ypaws.

“Got it, pater, assist the sister, whats to be done?

Tarquin sent young hares scurrying as he explained,

“Simple, really, one small fruit pie to each plate, four candied chestnuts, three honeyed plums, and a good ladle of meadowcream to dip em in, per plate, per creature.

“But what about this scrummy cheese n celery dip, Papa?

“Oh, er, nip back tthe kitchens, you three, an get the small wooden bowls to put it in. You there, sir, whats yname? Dont put the cheese n celery stuff on the plates with the fruit pies. Not done, yknow.

“Papa, shall I slice these oat fails an put em round the salad in a nice pattern?

“What? Er, yes, theres a good little hare maidNo! Give me that knife, Ill do the slicin. You, whatsaname, will ycome out the water, please. Oh hares n horrors! Rosie, where are you? I cant control this bally brood of yours, mine, I mean ours. Stop scoffin those honeyplums, you rip!

Simeon and Mellus sat with their footpaws in the shallows, oblivious to the bustle around them.

“Ah, this is the life, Simeon. I havent done this since I was a Dibbun. Nothing like it for cooling the paws after a hot day.

“Indeed, it certainly is refreshing. The old Abbey pond, there was nothing like it when we were Dibbuns. Fished it in spring, swam around it in summer, sailed and skimmed pebbles over it in autumn, and skated on it in winter. What a useful thing it is to be sure, Mellus. Listen, I can hear Oak Tom planning other uses for our pond.

The sturdy squirrel had Blaggut and Slipp by their ears, shaking them sternly as he lectured on manners. “Its share an share alike at Redwall. If I catch either of you grabbing roasted wheat ears before the others Ill duck some courtesy into you in yonder pond, understand?

The two searats were dancing a little jig of agony as Tom tugged their ears, when the mousebabe intervened.

“They ad enuff now, Tom. Cmon, Blackguts an Slick, men Funtil wants you to put lanterns in our boats.

Oak Tom released the searats and watched them follow the mousebabe off to the boats, rubbing their ears and grumbling. The squirrel dusted his paws off reflectively. “I dont like those two; theyre trouble, you mark my words!

Treerose pulled roasted wheat ears from the embers at the fires edge and stacked them with others, ready to be dipped into the bowls of celery and cheese. “Oh, give mem a chance, Tom, she said. “Theyre not used to Abbey life like Redwallers are. Now, how many more wheat ears do I need?

Benches and logs had been placed in a circle not far from the fire. Everybeast found a seat, and the food was served. As Abbot Saxtus shared a bowl of dip andwheat ears with Brother Fingle, he looked around at the happy faces in the firelight, Dibbuns and old alike, enjoying themselves hugely.

Fingle watched his Abbot. “An acorn for your thoughts, Father, he said.

Saxtus licked dip from his whiskers pensively. “My moughts, Brother? You may have them for free. I was wishing that Joseph and his party were with us here to enjoy this evening, Mariel and Dandin too. May the fates be kind to them wherever they are. You know, Fingle, nothing gives me more pleasure than to see my Redwallers happy and well fed. Contentment, it is a thing I love dearly. I was never one for dashing off on quests and adventures. The Abbey and its life is sufficient for an old stay-at-home like me. Im glad I thought of this concert. Look at themdid you ever see a merrier, more peaceful

bunch? Thats my adventure, the quest for contentment and happiness for all in my Redwall.

Brother Fingle accepted a fresh bowl of dip and wheat ears from a well-mannered Dibbun. “Here, Father Abbot, get some of this inside you before you content yourself off to sleep; youre starting to nod.

Tarquin produced his harolina, a cherished though slightly battered instrument. He tuned it, plucking the strings lightly, ears close to it. “There, good as the day I first serenaded Rosie and won her bally heart, wot? Righto, line up chaps, two to each corner, maids in the middle, bow to the center. Good, here we go with the mousemole reel!

Blaggut and Slipp found themselves hauled up among whooping and cheering Redwallers as Tarquin raised his voice:

“One, two, let me bow to you,

Away we go from the center through.

Oh there was a mouse in Mossflower,

And he was plump and cheery,

Lived right next to a mole so fair,

A little dark-eyed dearie.

Three, four, Ill tell you more,

Whirl your partner round the floor!

She baked a pie, oh my, oh my,

And said, Ive got no cherries,

Sir mouse when you go out abroad,

Will you bring back some berries?

Five, six, heres a fix,

Curtsy maids and gather sticks!

The mouse roved out into the woods,

And came back heavy laden,

With cherries and ripe fruit to boot,

To give unto the maiden.

Seven, eight, stand and wait,

Clap your paws, its very late!

The mole took up a wooden bowl,

The mouse he grabbed a ladle,

And as they ate that lovely pie,

They danced around the table.

Nine, ten and back to one,

Bow to your partners for the dance is done!

Laughing and panting, the dancers retired breathless to their seats. Blaggut whispered to Slipp, “We goin fer the treasure now, Capn? He was rewarded with a swift kick.

“We aint goin nowheres til I gets me wind back, bladderbrain. Whew, that dancin takes it outta a beast!

Tarquin cleared his throat officiously and took center stage. “Errahem! Father Abbot, Mellus marm, good creatures all, it is my singular honor to open the concert sing-in competition, wot? I have with me the jolly old prize for the winner; it is right here ... somewhere? The hare beckoned hastily to one of his leverets. “You there, thingybob, its under me seat. Bring the blinkin thing here, will you? Ah yes, as I was sayin, I have here with me the winners prize. As you can see, it is a badger drinkin vessel, hmm, chalice in fact, silver mounted, gold lined, with lots of rather jolly stones studded around it, precious gems, Id say. Now, whos goin t be the first to get up an warble off a song? Oh, by the way, we must thank our good chum Mellus for donatin this prize. Cheer for Mellus, thank you!

When the cheering died down, Mellus stood up, a grin of mischief on her broad face. “Thank you one and all. Now, as for the first singer, or singers, I think I have the privilege of choosing them. As is our custom at Redwall, guests first. Mr. Blaggut and Mr. Slipp, would you be so kind as to oblige us?

Willing paws seized the unwilling searats, who were hustled into the

center of the circle, where they stood nervously shuffling from paw to paw. Slipp was not amused.

“O no, mates, we aint no singers, searaer, travelers like us aint much good at singin, are we Blaggut?

“I likes singin*, Capn. Couldnt we sing em The Slaughter of the Crew of the Rusty Chain? Thats a good un?

SHpps furious protests withered under Oak Toms stern proclamation, “If youre too shy to sing, theres always the pots to be washed!

That seemed to decide the issue. Taking up searat performing stances, the pair stood straddle-legged with paws clenched above their heads, and began singing in hoarse, off-key voices:

“Whoa, the Capn of the Rusty Chain, Aint feelin much surprise, Es deadern a duck on the ocean floor, While the fish nibble out is eyes. An the crew of the Rusty Chain, Aint feelin too much pain, O ycant wipe yer nose when yer eads chopped off, An theyll never see their tails again ...

There was a pause as they consulted together, arguing over forgotten verses. Some of the gentler Red wallers closed their eyes and covered their ears as the song continued in the same bloodthirsty mode:

“O the boatswains got a spear in is liver, An the mates got a spear through is throat, An theyre usin the fat off an ole searat, To set alight to the boat.

Distressed cries began issuing from some of the Dibbuns, and a dispute arose with Slipp and Blaggut as to the next line.

“Ho theyve gone an skinned the cook ...

Slipp cuffed Blagguts ears soundly. “Puddenbrains, thats not til the next verse. I knows the line, it goes like this ...

“O they carved off the lookouts ears, An stuffed em up is no

“Enough! Stop this bloodthirsty ballad now! They were hauled unceremoniously back to their seats by an irate Mother Mellus as Tarquin called upon the next performer.

“Sorry about that, chaps, bad form, yknow! Sister Sage, I dont suppose youd like to warble us that absolutely splendid ditty about the robin

an the cuckoo?

After a bit of persuasion the old Sister got up and began singing. Her voice was loud and clear for one of such great age.

The night wore on as performers came and went: singers, dancers, and those who liked to recite poetry. Blaggut had eaten his fill and quaffed enough cordial to float a small boat. His head nodded fitfully, eyes closing as his chin dropped onto his chest, Slipp tweaked his nose muttering, “Wake yerself up, dozeyguts, were going t get the treasure.

They detached themselves stealthily from the gathering, creeping off into the night. Blaggut cast frightened glances about him as he clung to Slipps tail.

“Couldnt we go back an sit by the fire, Capn? I dont like it out ere in the dark night; the black shadder might get us both!

Slipp whirled on his unfortunate companion. “Buck-etnose! I told yer never tmention that agin. Cummere!

“Eeeyoowcheeyee!

“Stop squealin, you limpet eaded oaf!

“I cant elp it, Capn. Yore bitin me ear. Yeek!

The mousebabe and Furrtil sat proudly with the cup between them. Saxtus looked inquiringly at Mellus. “I thought you said that the mousebabe was a rogue and a scamp, the worst of all the Dibbuns? he asked.

The old badger mother shrugged. “That doesnt stop him and Funtil from being the best singers. Hahaha, that was the best laugh Ive had in seasons, The Song of the Pirate Pond Dibbuns. They deserved to win. What do you think, Simeon?

The blind Herbalist seemed preoccupied. “What? Er, oh yes, by far the most comical ...

Mellus could tell that Simeons mind was elsewhere. “Whats wrong, old friend, are you tired? she said.

The blind one felt about until he found the badgers paw. “Slipp and Blaggut have gone, and I didnt follow them.

“But why should you follow them?

“Because that one called Slipp is up to no good. Until now, I have trailed them whenever they went off alone. Both of them think I am a black shadow that haunts them, and it keeps them out of mischief. But I was a bit slow tonight; Ive let them get away.

The badger stood up decisively. “Right, leave it to me. Ill find em!

“I have a pretty fair idea where they are, said Simeon, standing up with her. “Gone to dig up the Dibbuns treasure at the southeast wall corner.

The mousebabe and Furrtil picked up their trophy together. “Hurr, usns show ee whurr that be at! said Furrtil.

Tarquin was starting up another reel for all to join in as the four creatures went off after the searats.

Slipp was digging with the long kitchen knife he had stolen; Blaggut used a piece of stick. Together they dug and sweated until Blaggut felt his stick hit something hollow. “Haha, here it is, Capnthe secret idden treasure of the hAbbey.

Slipp ordered Blaggut out of the hole and began digging feverishly with the knife. In a short while he had unearthed a small rectangular box, of the type used in the Redwall kitchen to store salt or spices. It was oak, bound with brass strip, and had a broken lock. The searat Captain tugged it from the earth and, wiping it on his smock, he clambered from the hole grinning from ear to ear.

“You was right, mate. You aint been right many times in yer life, but you was this time. We got the treasure! Throwing open the box, he turned the contents out upon the ground. They both stood speechless a moment, looking. It was typical Dibbuns treasure: a pawful of moldy acorns, some fragments of colored glass, faded ribbons, two hawk feathers, and a spinning top made from stone. Just the sort of things a Dibbun would consider precious.

Blaggut scratched his head with a soil-grimed paw. “Boggle me braces, Capn. That aint no treasure; tis only liddle beasts playthings!

Slipp picked up the box and hurled it at the wall, smashing it to pieces in his rage. “Rubbish an pups trinkets! Secret idden treasure, eh? Ill secret idden treasure those two liddle scum when I get me claws on em!

Walking slightly ahead of Mellus and Simeon, the two Dibbuns

materialized out of the night. Mousebabe pointed accusingly at Slipp, his voice shrill with anger. “Dirty ole searat, you breaked our treasure box t bits!

Slipp raised the long-bladed kitchen knife. “Yew snoutfaced liddle spawn, Ill carve ye to slices!

“No, Capn, dont arm the liddle uns! shouted Blag-gut, as he grabbed hold of Slipp.

The boatswain reeled back in agony as Slipp slashed the paw holding him from getting at the mousebabe. Slipp rushed at the Dibbun brandishing the knife and screaming, “Ill bury ye in yer own treasure ole!

He took a leap and was actually in midair when Mellus came bowling through like a furred thunderball. The two creatures collided with a roar and a scream, hitting the ground heavily. Simeon hurried forward, feeling the air about him as he called to the Dibbuns, “Mousebabe, Furrtil, stay out of the way, come to me!

Blaggut stood by helpless, his face a frozen mask of horror as Slipp rose from the ground. The great badger lay still, both paws clutching the knife handle as if trying to pull it free from her heart.

The screams of Mousebabe and Funtil cut the night like shards of broken glass. Simeons sightless eyes flickered this way and that as he pleaded, “What is it, Mellus? Are you all right?

Blaggut fell on all fours beside the stricken form. “Capn, youve slain the ole badger lady!

The searat Captain stood trembling. “The ole fool did it erself, he snarled, “jumpin on me like that! Got wot she deserved, orderin me round all the time!

Tears rolled down Blagguts face as he rocked back and forth. “You killed er, Capn! Oh, whatll we do now, Capn?

The Dibbuns were still screaming and clinging to Simeon. A brutal sneer lit Slipps face as he moved into action. Grabbing the badger chalice, which the little ones had dropped in their fright, he kicked Blaggut upright. “Well at least we aint leavin ere empty pawed. Come on, idiot, yore in this with me. Move yerself or stay ere an get torn t bits by the Redwallers. Im savin me own skin!

He slunk off, letting himself out by the small east wall-gate. Blaggut followed him into Mossflower, whimpering, “O, wotve we done, Capn? That was an appy place; I would ave lived there an been a searat no more. Now we got to run; we cant go back to the hAbbey, ever ... Slipp struck the weeping boatswain a heavy blow in his face. “Shut yer slobberin an git movin; theyll be comin after us soon, an I aint waitin for yew! Blaggut nodded dumbly and followed his Captain into the nighttime depths of the vast woodlands.

Father Abbot Saxtus sat on the ground, next to Melluss body, numb with shock. Oak Tom and Tarquin kept the Redwallers back, while Brother Mallen and Sister Sage took the Dibbuns and the very old back to the Abbey dormitories.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel sniffed back his tears and kept a stiff upper lip. “Tom, as soon as its clear here Ill get my lance and you get your bow. Well track the murderers by night and have them slain by dawn!

The big squirrel grabbed Tarquins paw tightly. “No! First we must see Mother Mellus at rest; its the right thing to do. Those two searats will be lost by now; they dont know their way around Mossflower. I do! When Im ready, Ill track them down. No need for you to go; I travel best alone. Ill leave their carcasses for the ant folk to pick over!

# 30

Several hedgehogs stood atop a dune; shielding their eyes against the noonday sun, they squinted at the curious procession coming their way. A sturdy female relaxed her grip on a warclub and turned to her mate saying, * “They be not rats, Gawjun.

The male hedgehog, a huge, primitive-looking fellow, shook his warclub in a businesslike manner. “Mayhaps they be not rats, Deekeye, but who be a knowin? Strangebeasts could be troublesome. One of they bes a hog; Gawjun will speak unto him. You there, hog! Stand forward an cease thy drums a bangin!

Bowly Pintips halted his recruiting party and silenced the four leverets who were enthusiastically battering away at four small mole drums. He signaled Furpp, who was carrying a broom as a banner, to follow him. Both went forward, and Bowly called up to the hedgehog leader.

“My name dont be hog; I be Bowly Pintips the Warrior, an I would parley with you!

Gawjun and Deekeye met with Bowly and Furpp at a spot halfway between their respective bands. Gawjun glared suspiciously at Bowly, and the young warrior stared back nonchalantly, tossing his hardened oatcakes from paw to paw.

Gawjun nodded approvingly at the youngsters boldness. “Be you with Foxwolf? he asked.

“Nay, I be with Gael Squirrelking against Foxwolf. There be others like me. Our banner is a broomwe will sweep Nagru and his horde out of Southsward.

“Big words for a little warrior. What be you doin in these parts, Bowly Pintips?

“Recruitin an army to do battle with the Foxwolf. Deekeye began swinging her warclub. Bowly stood motionless as it whirled by his snout, trying hard not to show fear. The female hedgehog let out an unearthly roar:

“Spike n striiiike!

The warclub struck the ground a hairbreadth from Bowlys footpaw.

Deekeye grinned ferociously. “Recruit-in army to do battle with Foxwolf, eh! Not before time, say I. What say you, Gawjun?

The big male bent his head, pressing his brow against that of Bowly until their spikes meshed in an antiquated hedgehog greeting. With his eyes practically touching Bowlys he gave a fleeting smile. “The tribe of Gawjun an Deekeye be with thee, Bowly!

Untangling his spikes with great dignity, Bowly tossed an oatcake high, caught it flat on his footpaw and flicked it up into his grasp. “Gather thy tribe an follow this mole to his dwellin; tis our meeting place. Come armed!

Bowly and his recruiting troop marched off, drums beating. The four leverets were all admiration for their companion.

“I say, well done, old lad!

“Spoke their lingo, too. Good show!

“Tough lookin crew, but you outtoughed em well!

“Yes, very basic beasts, hedgehogs, dont ythink?

Bowly glared at young Foghill. “Aye, but not as chat-tery as hares! Now, wheres those mice you told me about, Runtwold?

“Oh them. Bout two hours march west of here, old lad.

“Well, get those drums to bangin good n loud; were goin to recruit em. An Im not ole lad, Im Bowly Pintips, right!

Mariel had her paws full in the gatehouse. It was a constant strain trying to hold back Muta and Rab from breaking out to attack the rats on the stairway; both the badger and the otter were growing more impatient by the hour. They did not seem to realize that it was vital the gatehouse be held. Snorting their impatience they lumbered around, banging the door hard with their paws.

Then the mousemaid had an idea. She had been peeking out of the window, watching the arrows and sling-stones of her friends on the valley floor as diey shot upward to the plateau at the horde in the open drawbridge space. A sideways glance and she could see the horde firing back in retaliation. Trie Foxwolf and Silvamord could be heard as they yelled commands at their troops:

“Front rank archers and stingers. Fire!

“Over there, you fools! Fire higher!

“There! There! Cant you see them?

“Advance out onto the drawbridge; cut down the range!

The mousemaid waited until forty or fifty archers and slingers were halfway out onto the open drawbridge, then she turned to her two silent companions.

“Take the drawbridge up. Quick!

Glad to be doing something, the two beasts threw themselves upon the turning handles. The drawbridge went up like a rocket under their joint berserk strength.

Mariel watched in delight as screaming rats slid backward, though most tried clinging to the rough wood. She let her paw fall in a chopping motion. “Down drawbridge!

Leaping clear of the handles, Rab and Muta kicked the trip lever. There was an earsplitting squeal and the handles spun in a blur, followed by a loud thud as the drawbridge crashed back down. Three rats were flung into the moat, the others lay stunned and groaning. Muta played with the winding handle like a toy, lifting and dropping the massive structure in small movements. It was a clear warning to the horde that they would not be allowed to use the drawbridge. Nagru was beside himself with fury.

“A mousemaid and two half-baked casualties controlling the only entrance or exit to my castle. Never! Grutch, take archers up to the south battlements; they should be able to send arrows through the gatehouse window from there!

The Foxwolf looked around until his eyes rested on a hulking horderat, far taller and stronger built than most. “Lumba, take fifty good fighters, use armor, spears, and shields, and take the gatehouse. Smash the door and bring me the heads of those three beasts. Silvamord, take a third of our entire force up onto the battlementsit will be much easier to fire on the enemy from there.

The vixens tailed skirts swished as she turned. “Where will you be while all this is going on?

Nagru pointed downward with the iron claws of his wolf pelt. “Right here with the rest of my horde. We must defend this open gateway night and day until the gatehouse is recaptured.

Silvamord signaled her approval.

“Thats more like the Foxwolf of old. At last youre beginning to use that brain like a true commander.

Dandin lay behind a rock with Meldrum and Iris, watching the activity taking place within the open portal on the plateau. “Theyre up to something, and I have a feeling in my stomach its not going to do us much good, he said.

Meldrum the Magnificent squinted up at the figures beginning to appear on the battlements. “That blighters doin what any sensible General should do. Gettin them up high where they can sweep this valley floor with their arrows. Well be pinned down an1 slaughtered if we dont do somethin soon.

The three ducked behind the rock as a short cloud of arrows zipped down from the battlements. Somewhere close by there was a strangled cry as an otter fell to one of the shafts. Iris gnawed her lip anxiously, saying, “Weve got to stay here and face it out until help arrives. Ive been thinkingMariel cant be alone in that gatehouse. She couldnt raise and lower the drawbridge on her own.

They kept their heads low as another salvo of arrows quivered into the ground around them. Iris pulled one out, fitted it to her bow, and returned fire. She lay watching the path of her arrows trajectory in disgust.

“We have to shoot upward; theyre out of our range. That arrow didnt get anywhere near em!

Meldrum loosed a swift shaft in the direction of the drawbridge and was rewarded by a distant squeal. “Good job we can still reach those villains in the gateway, isnt it? Fire away, chaps. Keep yheads down an defend our position. Give as good as we get; thats what I always say, wot?

An arrow hummed by MarieFs cheek, bounced off the wall, and fell to the floor. She glanced at the window and threw herself flat against the side wall.

“Muta, Rab, over heretheyre on the battlements firing in at us. Get

against this wall; its on their blind side.

As the two warriors joined her, more arrows zipped in. Then the door began shuddering under the impact of some heavy object. “Look out, theyre knocking at the door! Mariel groaned.

Gael Squirrel king stood with his paws around Queen Se-rena and his son Truffen. The little squirrel felt his fathers paw shake with emotion as he gazed around the crowded sward in front of Furpps dwelling. Squirrels crowded everywhere carrying bows, slings, and spears. A graying elder approached the King; bowing low, he placed his forehead against Gaels footpaw.

“Majesty, we thought you were dead, but you live and all of Southsward is glad of this.

Gael raised the oldster up. “Weldan, my old friend, how did you find me here?

“Word is abroad of your escape. I have brought two hundred; they will not rest until you regain the royal house of Floret and the murderer Urgan Nagru lies slain. This I vow!

Serena was about to reply when drumrolls and shouting broke out behind the squirrels.

“Make way an stan aside for the recruitin party! Bowly Pintips and his party marched up in grand style. Furpp gave an elaborate flourish of his broom, halting them in front of the royal family. Serena came forward and took the young hedgehogs paws fondly.

“Bowly, my young warrior, she said, “where have you been?

He swept a nonchalant paw at the dunes around. “Thither an yon, Majesty, recruitin. Watch this!

To the north a dunetop suddenly bristled with hedgehogs brandishing warclubs. Another wave from Bowlys paw, and a crowd of yelling mice carrying long pikes appeared on a dune to the south. Serena clapped her paws with joy. “What wonderful recruiting!

Bowly tossed an oatcake into the air and caught it neatly. “Oh, that aint all. Watch this! he cried.

He took the broom from Furpp and waved it at a hilltop next to the one the mice stood on. An instant roar went up as masses of moles

appeared, each one armed with mace and chain. Furpp took one of the mole drums and banged out an irregular rat-tat. Between the hills marched another fourscore moles carrying oaken mallets.

Bowly and Furrp stood with the leveret squad as Gael and his family thanked them personally. The Squirrelking took the broom from Furpp and climbed the dune above the moles dwelling. He held the broom aloft, its twig bristles pointing at the sky.

“Friends, good creatures all, I thank you for rallying to me, and this, your standard. It is only an ordinary broom, but it will be the symbol of our army. This will show those who try to conquer and enslave us that ordinary things can become very dangerous, like this broom. Where it is raised aloft you will follow and wait. When it falls with the broomhead down, then we shall sweep! We shall sweep out the evil of Foxwolf and make Souths-ward clean to live in again!

Gael let the broomhead fall, and the hills shook to a mighty roar.

“Free Southswaaaaaard!

The army took off like a hurricane, headed for Castle Floret with Bowly in the vanguard. Racing alongside the tribal leaders were hedgehogs, moles, mice, otters, and squirrels. With the broom waving high in his paws, Bowly yelled his war cries to the four winds. He was a warrior!

# 31

Another heavy blow to the gatehouse door caused it to tremble and splinter. Mariel stood with her back against the wall, knowing she was not going to refuse the two dumb creatures who stood staring at her pleadingly. She nodded toward the door, saying, “Somebeast ought to stop them smashing it in ...

Lumba backed up the stairs, heading the group that carried the battering ram. He was confident that the next charge would burst a way through into the gatehouse.

“Last time nowgive it all youve got. One, two, charge!

Ten rats were carrying the ram. They sped down the stairs with the other forty close on their heels.

Before they reached it, the door swung open.

Unable to stop, they went pounding through the doorway. Muta and Rab met them head-onthe two berserk warriors were like eagles among pigeons. Spears were swept aside broken, shields bent double, and armor crushed like autumn leaves. The badger seized a rat in each paw and used them as flails upon the others. Rab Streambattle was among them like a flame, his sword-blade flashing as he hacked through armor and hide alike.

Hooktail had carried on running as he entered the room. He dashed past Muta and was about to turn when a mighty smack from Muriels Gullwhacker sent him sailing through the window where he met an arrow before falling to the moat. The mousemaid spun her weapon, punishing every head or face that appeared before her. With two rats clinging to her back Muta fought on, the bloodlust hot in her eyes; horderats bounced off the stone walls as she whirled her huge paws like a windmill.

Rab was out onto the stairs; dropping his sword in favor of a spear, he went to it with butt and point, using the center pole as a quarterstave until he made it to the top of the steps. Shaking off the two rats that clung to her like ticks, Muta grabbed the fallen battering ram. A scream of pure terror came from the remaining horderats. Muscle and sinew stood out on the old badgers scarred hide as she swung the ram, flattening rats against both walls. The rest broke and ran up the stairs,

only to find Rab armed with a spear on the top step barring their way. They turned, but Muta was coming through the door with the battering ram pointed at them.

Shutting her mind to the awful sounds, Mariel concentrated on unloading rats out of the window. One or two who had missed the wrath of Muta and Rab pushed past her and leaped howling into the moat. Mariel collected spears and began hurling them up at the archers on the battlements.

The battle won, Muta and Rab returned exhausted to the gatehouse. But there was still work to be done. The door had been torn off its hinges in the attack. Quickly they turned it on its side and, using the battering ram and the remaining spears, made a barricade.

Out beyond the plateau, Egbert the Scholar popped up unexpectedly out of the ground beside Meldrum and smiled apologetically.

“You must excuse me, he said. “I could go no farther because this large rock was in the way. My name is Egbert. How do you do?

Meldrum was lost for words. He sat staring at the mole. Egbert shook his head despairingly and launched into mole speech.

“Bo urr, zurr, oim Eggbutt ee mole, cumm to taken you tins out of this yurr place, burr aye!

As Dandin and Iris turned to stare at him also, Meldrum regained his composure and spoke.

“Come to take us out o here, wot?

Egbert dusted earth from his paws impatiently, “That is correct. Hmph! Amazing the things one must resort to when attempting to communicate. Listen, Ive come to take you out of here before you are all slain.

Dandin shook the moles paw warmly. “Well, Ill go along with that in any language. Were at your command friend; just lead on!

Meldrum waggled his ears reflectively. “Not so fast, laddie buck; some things are easier said than done. How can ybe so sure you can get us out ohere, eh, young molechap? Speak up; dont be shy.

Egbert donned his spectacles and looked at Meldrum over the top of them. “Hmm, shyness would be a virtue in some creatures, though I

doubt it is widely practiced among hares. How do I propose to get you out of here? Well, I could sit here discussing it at length with you. Duck!

They crouched quickly as more arrows cut the air.

Egbert continued as if nothing had happened. “Unfortunately I dont intend sitting about here and being shot at all day. Listen, I got Mariel into that gatehouse; trust me. I can get you out of here and into Castle Floret if you do as I say. Are you willing?

Iris shouldered her bow. “Were willing, Egbert. Always trust a mole, I say.

Meldrum the Magnificent had recovered his aplomb. Jamming his hat tight over his ears, he winked at Dandin. “Trust a mole; thats what I always say, too. Even if the blinkin creature spouts like a library scroll, wot!

Nagru joined Silvamord on the battlements to see how she was faring. The vixen explained the position to him.

“Were keeping that lot in the valley pinned down well, but your gatehouse scheme has failed. Lumba and his troop ended up in the moat and now that scurvy mousemaid has blocked the gateroom window, my archers cant get at them. Something has got to be done about the gatehouse. Come on, Foxwolf, wheres your cunning?

Nagru stared down at the boarded window hard and long, then his wicked eyes narrowed to slits. “Keep your archers trained on that window. Mingol, get rags, wood, and straw, lots of straw. Damp it all down well.

A malicious smile lit up the vixens face. “Youre going to smoke them out! she crowed.

Sicant pointed down into the valley. “My Lady, look! Theyre breaking and scattering!

Silvamords smile widened as she looked over the battlements. “Well, well, what a pitiful little army. Theyve had a bellyful and now theyre running off home. See them go! Archers, fire!

Nagru swiftly countermanded her order. “Cease, hold your arrows! Im going to teach those upstarts a lesson they wont forget. You stay here and see that the gatehouse is taken. Ill leave Grutch and some others

to hold me gateway in case of ambush. He whirled and ran for the stairs.

“Where are you going? Silvamord called after him.

The Foxwolf shouted back as he ran, “Im going to show em Im not afraid to attack. I rule Southsward, and theyll know about it before nightfall!

Silvamord could taste victory. She threw back her head and howled. “Make an end of it, Nagru! Kill them, leave none alive! Sicant, go and tell Mingol to hurry himselfIll smoke them out of there or choke them slowly to death!

Benjy had scouted out a clear running stream, and Joseph and Finnbarr called a halt on its bank in the late afternoon. Log-a-Logs Guosim shrews came in from foraging the hills and woodland bringing lots of apples, pears, and wild plums, even some cherries and a variety of roots and vegetables. The crew sat cooling their footpaws at the waters edge, Joseph keeping an eye on Wincey and Figgs as they paddled in the shadows.

Finnbarr sunk his teeth into a large, red apple. “Ahoy, BeUmaker, great country ereaboutsplenty of everythin just agrowin for the takin.

Joseph and Benjy were sharing cherries, seeing how far they could spit the cherry stones into the stream. Log-a-Log stretched out on the bank next to Foremole.

“Ah, this feels like home tmenothin like bein near a nice stream eatin* a pear. Though I wish we couldve had a fire; my cooks would make a great soup from those roots and vegetables.1

“Hurr, oi loikes zoop, zurr Log, tho oi dearly loikes a purr too, burr aye! said Foremole as he buried his face in a mellow pear with a squelch.

Rufe, Durry, and Patch had found an old willow further upstream. They swung on a springy limb as it bobbed them up and down into the water. Rosie munched her way through a heap of dark purple plums as she watched the young ones enjoying themselves.

“Yknow, well have to watch those young uns if we get caught up in a skirmish of any great size, she said. “I wouldnt like to think of my leverets havin to fight battles.

Wincey had wandered up onto the bank. Joseph cut up an apple for her, setting it out in slices, “Youre right, Rosie, he replied. “I couldnt bear to think of these little uns being hurt in any way. Hi, Figgs, dont go too far! Come back here this instant, dyou hear me, missie?

Finnbarr tossed an apple playfully at Joseph. “Yer a real ole mother en, BeUmaker. Stop fussin oer the liddle maid. Shes an otter, aint she? Ill wager Figgs can shift fer erself in water bettern you can.

The Bellmaker, however, was not convinced. “Figgs is far too little, Finn; shell get lost if she goes much farther downstream alone.

Finnbarr grasped Josephs paw, pulling him upright. “Ho come on then, fussbudget, well go an get er.

Together they waded downstream, past willow and red-berried rowan mingled with balsam and reed mace, the trees closing in an arch over the stream waters. Small clouds of midges flitted in and out of the sun-patterned shade, disturbed by the progress of the two wading creatures. Cupping paws about his mouth Joseph called aloud, “Figgs! Where are you, Figgs?

Finnbarr tugged the edge of the Bellmakers jerkin urgently. “Dont turn around too fast, matey. Shes beind us.

Joseph turned slowly. Figgs was there, seated on the brawny shoulders of an otter who, with about fifty others, lined the stream holding javelins menacingly. Finnbarr glanced over his shoulder to see a similar number appear apparently from nowhere, merging between foliage, sunshine, and shadow.

Figgs scrambled down from the otters shoulders and swam to Joseph. The Bellmaker ignored the javelins hemming him in on both sides and clucked disapproval at the otter babe. “Teh, tch, look at your smock and bonnet, theyre saturated.

This seemed to relax the otters. The big one spoke:

“I am Blerun Downriver. What names do you go by?

“Joseph the Bellmaker. This is Finnbarr Galedeep, and there are more of us upstream.

Blerun leaned on his lance and nodded. “I know; we have watched you since you camped there. Do you serve Urgan Nagru the Fox wolf?

Before an otter could lift javelin, Finnbarrs twin swords had cleared their sheaths. He went into a fighting crouch, his single eye glittering hotly. “No, matey, weve come tdo battle with im, so if youre on the Foxwolf s side wed best start the party right ere!

Blerun left his javelin sticking in the streambed and extended a paw toward Joseph and Finnbarr. “Your enemy is our enemy. We will fight him together, Finnbarr Galedeep.

So it was that the Pearl Queens crew began the final stage of their march to Castle Floret.

# 32

Morning sunlight flooded a copse in the still-green depths of northeast Mossflower. Dewdrops hung heavy and bright on leaf and petal, plentiful as the tears shed by the former boatswain of Pearl Queen, Blaggut. Exhausted after a nighttime flight through dense woodland, Slipp had dozed a scarce hour when he was awakened by the sobs of his companion. Red eyed and irate, the searat Captain picked up the stolen badger chalice and snarled, “Yew keep snottin an slobberin like that and yll rot yer eyes. Now stow that wingein, dye hear?

Blaggut did not even try; his whole body shook as more tears poured forth. “Wot did yer kill the ole badger for, Capn ? She never did us any real arm. You shouldnt ave stayed er!

Slipp trampled the grass in a circle around Blaggut, speaking through clenched teeth. “I killed er cos she was tryin to kill me. Cant you get that through yer thick ead? Anyow, she needed killin*, treatin me like some kinda wet-eared galley slave. Look, wotcher goin tdo, sit round ere cryin until they catches up with us? Come on, stupid, we got travelin tdo.

Slipp punctuated his words with the usual kicks at Blaggut. He sat unmoved, head in paws, still heaving with grief. “If I traveled for the rest ome days itll still be with me, Capn. That pore creature lyin stabbed to the eart, the liddle uns screamin*, an ole Blind Simeon a wonderin what was goin on. You go without me, Capn. Im no good to nobeast anymore!

Slipp seized Blaggut roughly and, pulling him upright, he began shaking him furiously. “Lissen, deadbrains, Im still the Capn round ere, an if I sez yore goin then go yer will!

No sooner had Slipp released him than Blaggut slumped down and continued weeping. The searat Captains rage knew no boundshe stormed about the copse, destroying flowers and tearing at the foliage as he gave vent to his anger.

Blaggut carried on as if unaware of it all. “Theyre good an decent creatures at the hAbbey, I could ave been one, too, in time. Though a searat cant change is colors they say, and mebbe thats true. If wed never stopped at Redwall, everybeastd still be livin there peaceful an appy; twas no place fer bad uns such as us.

Slipp could stand no more. Snatching up a thick branch of dead wood, he laid into Blaggut. “Up on yer paws, oaf. Leave the thinkin tme; Im the Capn an yore the fool! Come on, gerrup, you blitherin empty eaded, no account, washed-up gobbet o flotsam!

Blaggut got up.

He came at Slipp with a strange light in his tear-stained eyes, paws outstretched and teeth bared, regardless of the blows that were being rained upon him. Slipp began backing away. The branch broke as he slashed and struck at Blagguts head and body. Slipp tripped and fell and Blaggut was on him, his paws tight about the Captains neck. The broken branch fell from Slipps nerveless grasp as Blagguts viselike grip tightened. They lay face-to-face, the searat boatswains voice coming in gasps as he shook Slipp like a rag doll.

“ Fool! Aye, yer right, Capn, I was a fool, an oaf, an idiot, an ail those other names you called me. Thats cos I took up with you, Capn. Yore bad right through, youll never change, thats why I gotta do this. Sony, Capn!

It was well into noontide. The mourners stood around the flower-strewn heap of earth at the southeast corner of Redwall Abbeys ramparts. Red wallers and Dibbuns alike gazed sadly at Mother Melluss last resting place. Simeon leaned upon the paw of his Father Abbot, who had gathered strength as the day progressed. At the start of the day Saxtus had moved about like a creature in a trance, doing things automatically. Gradually the realization of his position as Abbot took over. Duty could not be ignored, so with a great effort Saxtus pulled himself together. He patted Simeons paw comfortingly before turning to address the Abbey dwellers.

“My good friends, the poems have been recited, the prayers all said. Mother Mellus has moved on to sunnier pastures, quieter noontides, and more peaceful woodlands, though she will always live in our hearts. But I can hear her speaking to me now, guiding me as ever she did from the time I was a Dibbun, right through until I was chosen as Abbot. I always heeded the wise words of Mellus, as I do now. She is telling me that Redwall life must continue.

Saxtus paused to smile and tweak a leverets ear.

“Mellus says that there is fruit to be picked in our orchard, boats to be sailed on the pond, work and play for all. As the summer fades to autumn we will have a great feast one day, to celebrate the memory of

our dear friend. Go now, think about this as you work hard and rest well!

There was a flash of sunlight and something glimmered through the air in a bright arc, falling to rest quietly on the fresh-dug earth of Melluss grave, where it lay unharmed.

The mousebabe was quicker than anybeast. He scurried forward and picked up the object. “Funtil, lookit, our badger cup wot we winned!

“Take it an live long in peace!

Every eye turned upward to the east walltop. Blaggut stood there looking unhappily down at where the badger lay buried. Oak Toms paw flew to his dagger and he moved toward the wall. Saxtus called out to Tarquin, “Stop him, I will not have that creature slain!

Tarquin intercepted Oak Tomas he began climbing. “Steady on, old lad. I know how yfeel, but the Father Abbot must be obeyed, wot? Lets hear what he has to say.

Blaggut walked around the ramparts and descended by the south wall steps, stopping on the final stair. His voice was raw and husky with sorrowing.

“I killed me own Capn this morn. Yore badger was a good creature,e did wrong to slay er. I wouldve stopped *im, but it all appened so quick. Anyow, I brought back the cup fer the liddle uns an thats that; you kin kill me now.

Saxtus took the dagger from Oak Tom and stowed it in his wide habit sleeve, then he turned to the mousebabe, “You saw what happened. I leave it to you. Does he deserve to die, or would you let him live?

There was a moments silence. Every Red waller looked on anxiously as the mousebabe trundled over to the wall steps and took Blagguts paw in his.

“Mister Blackguts is good, norra killer; he makes boats.

Funtil joined him, latching herself on to the searats other paw trustingly. “Hurr, that be roight, eem a gen-oelbeast, oi loikes im.

Saxtus spread his paws wide. “There you have it friends, from the mouths of Dibbuns. A little un can sometimes see things in others that us older ones cannot because our judgment gets clouded.

Simeon retrieved the dagger from Saxtus and gave it back to Oak Tom. “Well, do you still wish to slay him, Tom?

The big squirrel sheathed his blade. “No, I acted in haste out of my grief for Mellus. This Blaggut is no killer; if he was, hed still be running. But he returned, after he slew the guilty one. I can see that he is still confused about it, arent you, Blaggut?

The searat sat down upon the steps, ruffling the Dibbuns heads absentmindedly. “We lied when we told you we was travelers. We was searats, always ave been. Tho I never card tell of a searat who killed his Capn. I did, but I was drove to it. Capn Slipp was a bad un; hed a killed more if he lived.

Oak Tom sat on the steps next to him. “You did right, Blaggut, it was only justice long overdue. Good will always defeat evil, and there is good in you.

Tarquin L. Woodsorrel had been waiting to speak up. “Hmm, youll scuse me askin, old chap, but whatll you do now, I mean wherell you go?

Fumil looked pleadingly at the Abbot. “Ho say eem can stay yurr, zurr; oill mind im.

Blaggut smiled for the first time since the previous night. “Bless yer eart, liddle matey, but youll ave enuff tdo mindin yerself an growin up pretty. Id like to stay at yore hAbbey, but I dont think I can after wot ap-pened. One things sure, I aint a searat no more. Theres a snug cove by the sea, close to where I come ashore. It was an andsome place as I recalls, fresh water, vittles a growin out o the floor, and the sea close by. Thats where ole Blagguts bound for; I could live there.

Saxtus respected the searats decision, though he felt bound to inquire, “What will you do mere?

Blaggut stood up, lifting his chin proudly. “Ill build boats, Father. Im good at boatbuildin, tho tis a skill I never knew I ad til I came ere. Im a good boatbuilder, aint I, messmates?

The mousebabe and Furrtil chorused together, “Black-guts makes the best boats!

By late afternoon Blaggut was ready to set out, laden with provisions and tools donated by kind Redwallers. Saxtus had detailed a small party, headed by Oak Tom and Tarquin, to go with him. They would

help him to build a dwelling at his chosen place. The searat stood by Melluss grave and shuffled awkwardly.

“Gbye, marm. Sorry about yore trouble. Ill try to be as good an elpful to others as you was, I promises.

Furrtil and the mousebabe began weeping i neon sol ably at their friends departure. Blaggut pressed a pawful of candied chestnuts on them, saying, “Ho, stop blubberin, mates, youll ave me at it again. You can come an visit with me next summer if yer good an stop that cryin*. Lissen now, theres the Joseph Bell; its teatime. Urry along or yH be late!

He stood watching them until they disappeared into the Abbey. Wiping away a tear, the former boatswain of Pearl Queen hitched up the pack on his back and set off.

“Come on, Mr. Tarquin, I promise you I wont make no skilly an duff fer supper. Men you will build the fire, an mayap Mr. Tom11 do the cookin.

They set off up the path with Tarquin muttering darkly, “Oak Tom as cook, hmph! I should say not; the blighterd probly have us eatin treebark an drinkin water. Now Brother Mallen, theres a useful mouse, good cook too. Hi, Mallen old chum, cmere, I want a word with you!

The shadows lengthened as they left the dusty path and cut off into Mossflower Wood.

# 33

The Urgan Nagru buckled a belt over his wolfhide to hold both sword and dagger and strode purposefully to where two-thirds of his horde awaited him in an inner courtyard. Gray rats in serried ranks held aloft banners, spears, lances, and pikes. They stood silent in the calm that comes before a storm, every eye upon their Lord as he positioned himself at their head. Drawing his sword, Fox-wolf gave a bloodcurdling yell and charged out of Castle Floret.

“Owoooooh!

The drawbridge shook to the pounding paws of the gray tide; they thundered out down the plateau steps, their barbaric war cry ringing into Southsward.

“Urgan Nagruuuuuu! Kiiiiiillll!

Mariel watched from the gatehouse window. As soon as the last horderat was clear of the castle, she rapped out an order to her two silent helpers.

“Up drawbridge!

Muta and Rab had the huge timbered structure slammed shut seconds after the mousemaid had given her order. Mariel stood watching through a slit in the wrecked table which shielded the window, smiling with grim satisfaction.

“Foxwolf is locked out of Floret!

Muta moved anxiously from side to side, nostrils twitching, eyes wide. Mariel grabbed the big badgers paw, saying, “Muta, what is it?

Rab divedthrowing himself at them he knocked both to one side as a smoking mass of debris crashed through the barricade. It was swiftly followed by two barrels, both alight and packed with wet straw. Smoke billowed thickly around the confines of the room, as more bales of damp green branches bounced down the stairs into the gatehouse. Coughing and spluttering, Mariel made it to the window and pushed aside the table that covered it. A hail of arrows whined in. The mousemaid threw herself flat upon the floor, her mind racing. The barrels would not go through the window, they were too large, and now the window was no longer shielded by the table. It was time to

leave the gatehouse.

“Muta, Rab, she shouted, “we must get out of here, but first the handles of the winding drum have to be broken so that the drawbridge stays up. Can you do it?

Coughing and gasping for breath, their eyes red and watery, the three friends felt about in the dense, smoky gloom. Muta gave a strangled grunt as her formidable paws fell upon the handles. With strength born of desperation the badger threw herself upon the mechanism. Mere wooden handles were no match for her furythey cracked and splintered momentarily before snapping clean off. Now the drawbridge was shut and locked. Gasping for air, Muta rushed out onto the stairs, still holding the broken handles in her paws. Rab materialized out of the smoke to join her. Wiping their eyes, both creatures looked at each other.

Mariel had not made it out of the gatehouse!

Under Egberts instructions, none of the creatures on the valley floor stayed together. When Iris gave the word they scattered widespread, each one tacking and dodging as they made for the cover of the wooded hills surrounding the valley. Once they were under cover of trees and clear of arrow range, everybeast made for the gathering place, a thicket on the north side, behind the castle. Egbert met them there.

Meldrum was last to arrive. He plucked an arrowhead from his tunic epaulette saying, “Huh, if Id been a hare-length backward in comin forward, that blighter would have ruined me tunic. Good job its not the dress one. Right, Educated Egbert, where to now?

The mole glanced severely over his spectacles at Meldrum. “Let us strike a bargain. Do not refer to me as Educated Egbert and I will not call you Hollow-Headed Hare. Agreed?

Field Marshal Meldrum Fallowthorn the Magnificent sniffed. “As ywish, sah. Hmm, touchier than most moles this lad, wot?

Egbert pushed aside the shrubbery of bush and plant to reveal the cave at the north side of the plateau base. Dan-din whistled softly. “A secret entrance to the castle, wonderful! Lead on, friend.

The mole removed his glasses and polished them busily. “Id rather not, thank you. I think it would be propitious if I stayed in this area, to show others the way in. You must realize that Floret is still full of

rats under the vixens command. As I do not profess to be a warrior, there would be tittle use for me to accompany you. I am sure you understand.*

Meldrum raised his eyebrows at Iris. “ Propitious, wot? The fellers a walkin wordsmith!

“Righto, thats fine with me, friend, said Dandin, watching Egbert nervously polishing his glasses. “But how do we get up into the castle? Is mere a secret way?

Relieved to be out of the action, Egbert smiled. “There are many secret ways. Follow any of the tunnels and you are bound to come out in some part of Castle Floret.

Dandin unsheathed his long dagger. “Thats good enough for me. Lets go!

Heading a band of horderats, Silvamord waited in the corridor that led to the gatehouse stairs. She fanned smoke from her nostrils as Mingol lit another barrel of wet straw.

“Send it down to the gatehouse, Mingol. They must be well choked in there by now, but its best to be certain.

Mingol kicked the barrel, and it rolled off down the corridor. Bouncing down three small steps, it hit the wall and vanished from view as it trundled off down the gatehouse steps. Silvamord ran her tongue delicately along the edge of a vicious-looking curved sword.

“I hope at least one of them staggers out still alive!

Muta was very much alive. She came thundering into the corridor carrying the burning barrel and hurled it straight at Silvamord and her rats. They leaped aside with cries of horror as the barrel smashed to staves and the mighty badger came at them, smoke pouring from her fur.

Rab had been into the gatehouse and rescued Mariel. Carrying her across his brawny shoulders, the otter made it to the portion of the corridor on the far side of the stairs. Depositing the gasping mousemaid gently on the floor beside a window, Rab left her there to recover. Then, sword in paw, he launched himself into the attack.

The corridor was a melee of smoke and noise. Silvamord had gotten over her initial shock, and now she urged her rats on in front of her,

staying well distanced from the two creatures she feared most.

“Rush them! she screamed. “Hack them to bits, theyre well outnumbered!

Rab and Muta were separatedboth had their backs to opposite walls. The otter fought with berserk fury, his blade flickering as it sought, thrust and parried. Muta had a winding handle and a barrel stave as weapons, and any rat who came in range was smashed flat by a swinging blow from either one. The badger fought with the strength of ten.

Through the smoke and chaos Silvamord could see that the pair would not last. She dropped to the back of the pack, striking out with the flat of her swordblade as she urged the horderats on. “Keep at them, weve got them, press in on them!

Mariel stuck her head out of the window and gulped down clean, fresh air. She rested a moment, regaining her balance. A sound of running caused her to pull her head in and look down the corridor. Reinforcements under the command of Crutch were coming to help Silvamord from the opposite direction. Galvanized into action, the mouse-maid unlooped the knotted rope from around her body. Thwack Whock!

The first two rats fell to her Gullwhacker as Mariel whirled it in the teeth of the oncoming foe.

“Redwaaaaallll!

Faced with overwhelming odds, the mousemaids warrior spirit rose; the hard, knotted rope end was everywhere like a blur. Foerats tripped over their fallen comrades as they tried to get at her. Teeth flew, heads cracked, and limbs splintered as Mariel of Redwall made her stand.

The smoke was beginning to clear under the trampling paws of horderats. Silvamord could see that the hard-pressed trio had only moments to survive under the numbers that assailed them. Waving her sword she pressed forward crying, “Dont stop! Get in there! Kill them!

Dandin emerged from behind a wall tapestry to find himself in a broad passage, broken at intervals by short flights of steps. Iris and Meldrum held the tapestry aside as the rest of the otters came out of the secret tunnel. Dandin suddenly held up a paw for silence. Echoing along the stone hallway came a faint cry.

“Redwaaaaalll!

Breaking into a headlong dash, he tore off shouting, “This way, its Mariel! Redwaaaaaaallllll!

Taking up the Abbey war cry, the small force followed him at a flat-out run.

The rear followers of Grutchs command were hit hard and fast by the charge. Dandin came vaulting in on a spear, flattening a rat as he took up position alongside Mariel. Swinging the Gullwhacker full in a rats face she yelled at Dandin over the noise of combat, “Get help to Muta and Rab. Quickly!

But there was little need for the mousemaids plea. Iris tore past them, wreaking havoc with a broken javelin as she screamed with joy.

“Rab! Rab Streambattle! Its me, Iris!

Suddenly, Rabs swordblade was revolving like a windmill in a gale as he fought his way toward her, the words ripping unbidden from his throat.

“Iris! Iris!

Meldrum battered his way with a pike until he was at Mutas side. The old campaigner winked at her. “Right, here we go, back to back now. Bet I wipe out more vermin than you do, marm, wot?

The big badger took up the challenge with a grunt. Placing her back flat against the hares, she moved with him. They were unassailable, a complete fighting machine.

Silvamord saw the tide turning against her. She was puzzled as to how the intruders came to be inside Floret, but not unduly worried. There were still lots more horde-rats at her disposal. Slipping away from the rear of her contingent she hurried up to the battlements, where most of her force were stationed to sweep the valley floor with their bows.

“Sicant, Hooktail, get every rat here down to the gatehouse corridor. Follow me!

Muta, Rab, and Mariel were safe among the otters. They regrouped in the corridor. The horderats milled about on the other side farther up, uncertain of what to do without somebeast to lead them. Rab Streambattle soon made up their minds for them. Exercising his new-

found voice, he led what remained of the small rescue force against the foebeast.

“Chaaaarge!

The rats took one look at the howling warriors leaping over battle debris and fallen bodies, and panic set in. They broke and ran off in retreat.

Eyes blazing, weapons swinging, the avengers came after them, with Mariel, Dandin, Rab, Iris, Meldrum, and Muta in the lead.

# 34

Urgan Nagru stood on the wooded hillside, sword and dagger drawn. His chest heaved with exertion as he gazed around at the silent trees. “Ill find them; theyve got to be here somewhere!

A rat Captain named Blade tail slashed the undergrowth with his spear. “The way they were running, Sire, Id bet theyre right out of Southsward heading north now.

“They can run to the gates of dark ice, Ill still find them and put an end to it all. Nagru began walking uphill resolutely. “I never left an enemy alone in my life until victory was mine. Deadbeasts never come back to fight again, remember that, Bladetail!

The rat Captain recalled Muta and Rab but held his silence. Nagru was in a killing mood. All along the hillsides horderats began moving upward with their leader. Nagru pointed his dagger at one rat. “Viglim, scout ahead; get up on top and see if you can pick up their trail. Look sharp!

Viglim saluted and dashed off ahead. Two horderats toiling side by side climbed upward; they watched Viglim reach the top, and then he was lost to sight.

One of the rats slowed to regain his breath. “I think were chasin* shadows; theyre long gone.

His companion pushed on, replying as he went, “Thatll suit me; anythin fer an easy life, mate. Though weve got to wait until Nagru gets tired of the chase.

Nagru was nearly at the top, when a scream caused him to look upward. This was followed by a noise like a thousand dull drums. Viglim came toppling back downhill, a small circular object rolling behind him. Letting the body of Viglim roll past him, the Foxwolf trapped the circular object with his footpaw. He picked it up, inspected it, and passed it to Bladetail, saying, “What do you make of this?

“Sire, it looks like an old stale oatcake, though its too hard for that. Maybe its some kind of rock. Whats that noise up above?

Nagru quickened his pace. “Well soon find out. Lets take a look.

The Foxwolf was first to breast the hilltop. The drumming noise was the ground thrumming to legions of paws. Bearing down on him like a tornado came Bowly Pintips at the head of an army of otters, mice, moles, hedgehogs, and squirrels. As they ran, a mighty cry arose from the battle host.

“Freeeee Southswaaaaaard!

Nagru was a seasoned warrior, and he did not panic as most creatures would have. Waving his sword, he shouted urgently to his horderats, “Rally to me!

Every rat hastened to obey. Nagru was not given to idle commandsthey sensed the urgency in his voice.

Scarcely had they grouped when the Southsward army came pounding over the hilltop and the two forces clashed. The battle broke over Nagru with a vengeance.

Squirrels immediately raced up treetrunks and began hailing arrows downward into the horderats. The front ranks were mainly the tribe of Gawjun and Deekeye; wielding their warclubs, the hedgehogs waded in, only to be met by Nagru sending spears and pikes straight at them.

Bowly and his leverets cut to one side. Picking up a lance from a fallen otter, the young hedgehog and his troop fought their way into the hordes flank, only to find themselves surrounded. They gathered around Runtwold, who had taken a sword thrust in his footpaw, and tried fighting their way out. Luckily a party of moles saw their predicament and came to their aid with maces swinging.

Nagru sought out Bladetail. “Retreat, sound a retreat! he shouted. “Well take them on the valley floor.

Bladetail blew on a bone whistle; the response was immediate. Like a tide of gray, the horderats flooded down through the trees of the wooded slope to the open valley. Nagru had arrived before them. He positioned a line of archers to fire at the first wave of Southswarders emerging from the trees. Those carrying spears and lances were sent back to lie in a slight dip in the ground, while the rest grouped behind them. It was hastily done, but the Foxwolf was satisfied that his more disciplined horde would triumph against the wild rabble.

With a rousing yell, the Southswarders broke out of the tree cover and charged out onto the valley floor. Gael Squirrelking was at their head, holding high the broom banner. Gawjun saved them both by throwing

himself on the King and bringing him down. The arrows zipped over their heads, felling the first rank of Southswarders. Bowly called from behind the old spread oak, where he was supporting the wounded Runtwold. “Back to the trees! Dont charge into the open!

Keeping their heads down, Gawjun and Gael made it back to the trees. Now Nagru ordered his archers to drop back. They lay in the land dip with the spear and lance rats. Arrows and slingstones, like clouds of vicious hornets, rattled back and forth between the two armies.

Gawjun thumped his warclub against a tree and slumped down moodily. “I thought twould be a straight battle against yonder vermin; now we be caught in a standoff!

Bowly nodded knowledgeably. “I been in one o them standoffs. We bide “ere until help arrives; thats what we do!

“Whered thy sense come from? said Deekeye, curling her Up. “Were supposed to be the help thats arri-vinwholl help us?

Nagru had assessed the situation now that the field of combat had been established. The cunning that had made him Lord of the cold lands came to the fore as he laid plans.

“Bladetail, Coldclaw, take two squads and drop back. Retreat until you are out of range, then split up and go to opposite sides of the valley. Make your way through the trees and attack them from both sides. When you go at them, create lots of noisethat should provide enough distraction for my main force to mount a surprise charge from the front.

Gael had all the squirrels up in the treesit was a good position to fire arrows from. He was joined by Bowly and as many others with slings who could climb up into the high branches. They pelted the horderats hard, harassing them constantly every time a head or paw showed from the dip in the valley. Bowly saw the two squads retreating and chuckled. “Were drivin em back, see!

Gael shook his head doubtfully. “Foxwolf is no fool; hes up to something.

Inside Castle Floret, Mariel and her friends found their fortunes reversed abruptly. They had pursued the remnants of their foes up a flight of stairs, only to be met by Silvamords counterattack. Masses of horderats poured down the stairs from the battlements, and the friends were forced to turn and retreat. Back down in the corridor a

tide of gray swept in from every available entrance. Whooping and screeching, they chased the small depleted army of Southswarders. Dandin, Rab, and Muta fought a way through, protecting the rearguard as Mariel ushered her fighters along the corridor. It was no easy task. Meld-rum had taken a spear thrust in his shoulder and he hob-bled along, supported by Troutlad and Greenbeck, complaining loudly.

“The old tunics ruined now, good V proper. Foul villains, chuckin their spears about with no regard at all to a chaps good togs, wot? This place must be a flippin rat paradise; never seen so many of the vermin in all me born daystheres no end tthe blighters!

Iris saw two of her otters fall to arrows; she appealed to Muta as they passed a side chamber. “What about that place, is the door locked?

Locked doors did not stop the big badger. She hurled herself at the door. Hinges and lock gave way together and the door fell flat. Iris shook her head. “Its just a room, wd be trapped in there! she said.

Mariel saw that the horderats had slowed now, distancing themselves but still advancing under Silvamords shouted commands. “Stay your distance, dont clash with em! Archers, keep firing and following until theyre all cut down!

Two more Southswarders fell to the horderat arrows. Iris flung back a fallen spear at the rats, shouting, “Muta, the doorcan we use it for a shield?

The badger grunted and strained, maneuvering the fallen door until she was carrying it lengthwise across her back. Meldrum dismissed Troutlad and Greenbeck. “Go and help her; two big, stout lads like yselves shouldnt be totin me about. Ill shift for meself, wot?

They took the ends of the door, lightening Mutas load. The shield proved quite effective; the small group made its way down the corridor until Rab stopped them. “Not that way; its the banqueting chamberits too wide, theyd be able to surround us.

Dandin ran ahead and took a look at the chamber. He came hurrying back with bad news. “Theres more rats coming through from that side!

Mariel cut off down a passage. “Come on, this is the only way left! she called.

Rab Streambattle hesitated. “But it doesnt go anywhere; theres only a small room down there. Well be blocked in!

“Better than bein in the middle of a rat sandwich, said Meldrum, prodding him forward. “Hurry up, old lad, any port in a storm!

Silvamord relaxed at the entrance to the passage and congratulated Sicant and Hooktail. “Good work, well done! Theyre bottled up tight!

She eyed the rats around her, settling on one who looked bolder than the rest. “You there, whats your name?

“They call me Ugrath, Lady.

The vixen clapped Ugraths back, her tailed skirt tinkling musically as she paced around him. “I watched you, Ugrath; you fought well. Theres a little job you can do for me. Do you think youre up to it?

Ugrath pulled in his chin and stuck out his chest proudly. “I am yours to command, Lady!

“Good. I want you to take a message to those fools. Tell them if they throw down their arms, bind the badger and the otter tight, and come out here, I will spare their lives. But it must be done immediately, or I will strike at them and leave none alive. Go now!

Ugraths throat bobbed as he swallowed, then, grasping his pike tight, he set off down the passage. Sicant exchanged glances with the vixen. “Youll let them live, Majesty? she asked.

Silvamord drew her curved sword, testing its edge on her paw. She raised one eyebrow at Sicant. “Well, what do you think?

There was silence from down the passage, followed by a sound of voices and an anguished yelp. Ugrath came staggering back, minus his pike and nursing his nose with both paws. He squinted at the vixen through a swollen eye. “Mousemaid with a rope, she ...

Silvamord silenced him with a glare, then turned to the massed rats crowding everywhere. “Pikes and long spears, archers behind, follow up with swords. Charge!

# 35

Egbert the Scholar was not feeling very happy as he stood with one paw in the valley and the other inside the cave entrance. The mole knew that there was fighting and bloodshed inside Florethe could hear the faint sounds of conflict from the south side of the valley where Nagru was battling with Gael Squirrelkings army. Egbert gave a whimper of anguishhis former relatively peaceful life was now shattered by war. Timidly, he ventured beyond the bushy screen that hid the secret entrance to Floret, intending to escape from it all up the north slope, which faced the castles rear side.

Suddenly, a sound in the undergrowth startled him. He turned to run back to the cave and was immediately swept off his paws by a murderous-looking beast. Lying flat on his back, the terrified mole covered both eyes, so that he would not have to see the dreadful apparition. It was a big, villainous-looking otter, covered with tattoos and scars, with one eye and a musselshell and carrying twin curved swords. Egbert curled into a ball* hoping his end would be swift and painless. A voice, firm but friendly, sounded close by. “Put up those swords, Finnbarr, youll frighten the poor mole to death!

Egbert uncovered his eyes and looked around. He was surrounded by a host of javelin-wielding otters and shrews armed with rapiers. The speaker, a strong-looking mouse, with twinkling eyes and a gray beard, helped him upright and shook his paw in a friendly manner. “Hello there. Im Joseph the Bellmaker. Dont be afraidyouve nothing to fear from us. You dont look like one of the Foxwolfs creatures.

The knowledge that he was out of danger restored the scholarly moles voice. “Creature of the Foxwolf, me, Egbert the Scholar? he said, indignantly. “Never! I, sir, am what is known as a casualty of war. It is no small thing having to leave Castle Floret because the place has been turned into a battleground, I can tell you!

Foremole was astounded at Egberts lack of mole accent. “Burrhurr, ee talken wunnerful pretty, zurr Heg-butt!

“Battleground? Log-a-Log interrupted. “You mean that theres fightin goin on inside that castle? Whos battlin* with who, matey?

Egbert adjusted his nose spectacles prissily. “I think the phrase is, with whom ... He caught an impatient glare from the sea otter and

hastened to explain. “Actually, its the forces of Silvamordshes the mate of Nagru. Theyre battling with a small mixed group led by my friend Mariel ...

Suddenly the moles footpaws left the ground and he found himself hoisted up in front of Josephs burning stare. “Mariel! How do we get into that castle? Tell me!

The words flew in a babble from Egberts mouth. “Secret castle into the caveI mean secret cave into the castle. Put me down! Ill show you!

Driven by the Bellmakers urgency, Egbert scurried willy-nilly through the passages and tunnels leading upward into Floret. Joseph and Finnbarr followed close on his heels, with Log-a-Log and Blerun the otter leading the large band that was strung out behind in the dark, narrow passages. Finnbarr Galedeep ducked his head low, following the mole on all fours. “I ope ye know where yer goin, messmate.

Egbert had become lost in his haste, but he did not admit it. “Aha! Wood paneling. This is ithalt and give me space! He tugged aside a thin oak slat and squeezed through, looking about speculatively at the new entrance he had found. He was forced to jump aside with a startled squeak as three sections of the wainscot were slammed flat on the floor and armed creatures began pouring in. Joseph took the moles paw in a gesture of friendship.

“Thank you, Egbert. There is one more favor I would ask of you. Back in the entrance cave you will find three small creatures, Wincey, Benjy, and Figgs. Would you be so kind as to watch over them until this thing is finished?

A smile of relief crossed the moles face. “Indeed I will, Joseph. If you will excuse me, Ill go and attend to them straight away!

Foremole stopped him climbing back into the tunnels. “Noice place ee ave ere, zurr Hegbutt, hurr aye!

The Scholar lapsed into mole dialect to reply. “Bo urr, shem noice awroight, zurr. Oi be off naow to lukk arter ee liddle uns. Gubye, moler!

Finnbarrs teeth gleamed white in the gloom of the dim chamber they had emerged into. “Must be summat wrong with that unhes goin to miss all the fightin. Come on, buckoes, git yerselves through ere. We aint got all summer!

Finnbarr had been one of the first through the opening. He made a quick scouting trip, accompanied by Durry, Rufe, and Fatch. Sliding silently back into the chamber, he found Joseph among the creatures crowding the ill-lit room. “Bellmaker, I found where the fights at. Along the passage outside an down some stairs. You kin ear the ullabaloo from the top o the stairwell!

Joseph hefted a long ash stave that he favored as a weapon crying, “Then thats where Mariel and Dandin will be. Are we ready?

Finnbarr was already racing Blerun for the door. “Las one down theres a flat crab!

Mariel saw the charge coming. She swung her Gull-whacker as Troutlad, Greenbeck, and Muta picked up the door and headed the countercharge. Behind them, the small force swung slingstones into the hordes front rank as they dashed down the passage with only a battered door between them and the crowds of gray rats.

“Redwaaaaaallllll! *

They met with a crash, the door flattening several rats as the long spears and pikes sought out the Southswar-ders. Dandin led them under the spearpoints, ducking low as he dived in with his long dagger drawn. Arrows came hissing over at the slingers; those who were not struck returned slingstones fast and hard. Grunting and slashing, roaring and striking, the conflict went on in the narrow passage.

Silvamord stood on the backs of two rats who were bent double. They gasped as she leaped up and down excitedly, shrieking, “Finish them off! Kill, kill, kill! A mighty blow from Josephs stave sent her spinning.

Suddenly the air was filled with wild warcries.

“Logalogalogalog!

“Galedeeeeeep!

“Southswaaaaaaard!

“Redwaaaaaaaallllll!

Then the crew of Pearl Queen and Blerun* s otters were in the thick of it. The horderats fought viciously, knowing they were fighting for

their lives. Mariel and her company gave a ragged cheer as the rats who were attacking them turned and retreated down the passage. The battle flowed outward; clashing steel echoed as Southswarders, aided by Peart Queens crew and Bleruns otters, matched their courage against the savagery of Silvamords horderats. Joseph beat his way through the melee until he was at the side of Mariel and Dandin. Laying a rat senseless with a sweep of his stave, he grinned and bowed his grizzled head to them both.

“Daughter!

“Father!

“Dandin!

“Sir!

The Bellmaker flinched as Mariels Gullwhacker whipped by his ear, taking out a rat who was sneaking up on him. “I see you still favor the old knotted rope, he said.

Gullwhacker hummed as Mariel swung it in a blurring pattern. “Aye, its as good as any weapon when theres fighting to be done. Come on, lets give em blood n vinegar! With a hearty roar, the three warriors threw themselves into the fray.

Log-a-Log and the Guosim shrews had fought their way across the banqueting chamber. Several shrews fell to horderats spears until the Guosim got the measure of their enemies, then they fought in close, their deadly shrew rapiers laying the foebeasts low as they ducked in under the spearshafts. Blerun and his otters put bows and javelins to good use as they battled along the corridor and up flights of spiral stairs. Sometimes they would fight paw to paw, javelin against spear and pike; at other intervals they found themselves crouching in doorways as they exchanged arrows with the rats.

Durry, Rufe, and Patch were fighting as a team. Slinging hard pebbles they would pop up in strategic places, hurl off a volley, and drop down again, only to appear in another place. Rufe spotted Silvamord slinking along the side of a corridorthe vixen was looking for an avenue of escape. Threading her way between the horderats that were backed to the wall, she weaved sinuously toward one of the staircases, staying well away from the area where Muta and Rab were beset by a crowd of gray foe-beasts. Setting a good-sized stone in his sling, Rufe swung it hard and accurately. It struck the vixen somewhere between neck and shoulder, and she went down. Yelling triumphantly, the

young squirrel threaded his way through the chaos to where Silvamord lay. Durry saw him go and followed him, calling out, “Rufe, come back here! Stay with men Patch!

Patch had not realized Rufe was elsewhere until he heard Durrys shout. Seeing the danger his friend was in, the shrew overtook Durry, crying out a warning. “Rufe, stay away from her!

The young squirrel had reached Silvamord. He turned his back on her, shouting to his friends, “Ive captured their leader!

Silvamord sprang up and slashed at his back with her sword. Patch saw Rufe go down. He hurtled forward and threw himself upon the vixen; swinging his stone-loaded sling, he caught her in the face as she brought the sword up to finish Rufe off. Silvamord thrust backward at the shrew, clinging doggedly to her backshe felt him go limp and slide off. A slingstone caught her paw, and Durry rushed in howling as he readied another stone to his sling. With a snarl the vixen raced off up the stairs.

Freeing himself of a rat, Rab Streambattle glimpsed Silvamord disappearing up the steps and pointed in her direction. Flinging aside a stunned rat, Muta grunted and took off in pursuit Rab went in an entirely different direction, as fast as his paws would carry him. He knew Floret and he was certain of the exact point on the battlements where the vixen would emerge.

Rufe staggered upright helped by Durry, The hedgehog saw the rent in his friends tunic and the blood seeping from his back. “Rufe, she got you. Are you all right?

Rufe crouched beside Patch, cradling the shrews head in his paws as he replied, “Im wounded, but Ill live. Whats wrong with Patch?

Durry saw the rips on both sides of the shrews tunic and the spreading dark stains. Silvamords sword had gone right through. Patchs head lolled to one side as he smiled weakly into Rufes face. “Told you Id look after you, didnt I, mate?

The eyes of Patch, the loyal Guosim shrew, clouded over and closed for the last time. Durry Quill turned and guarded both his friends. Rufe had both paws around the body of his protector, weeping softly as he rocked him back and forth.

Silvamord panted hard as she pushed herself upward on the stones of the spiral stairs. Behind her she could hear the relentless pad of Mutas

paws getting nearer. Not daring to look back, the vixen pressed onward and upward, fear clutching her heart in its icy claws. Fumbling hastily, she unlatched the roof door, slamming it behind her as she dashed out onto the battlements with a sob of relief.

Rab Streambattle stepped out from behind a turret, sword at the ready. Silvamord heard the door behind her burst into matchwood as the badger came cannoning out onto the battlemented roof. Whirling like lightning, she struck at Muta. The badger dodged aside, catching the blade in one paw as it hit the stonework. Though the edge cut into Mutas paw, she hardly felt itthe hated vixen standing before her was all that she could see. Dragging the sword from Silvamords nerveless grasp, the big badger snapped the blade between her paws like a twig. With a scream of terror, the vixen took a running leap over the battlements.

Muta and Rab dashed to the edge and watched Silvamord falling, down, down, down, to land with a dull splash in the moat.

Rab smiled into Mutas angry, frustrated eyes. “Shes mine, friend. Nothing escapes from an otter in water!

Dropping his sword, Rab sailed in a graceful arc as he dived from the battlements of Floret. He struck the water cleanly with hardly a splash. Muta watched the still moat from her high vantage point for a long time, but nothing disturbed the water save ripples. Then she saw Rab slip from the water and sit watching on the bank. Moments later a still-bloated form bobbed to the surface. Rab had spoken truly; nothing did escape an otter in the water. Silvamord, the mate of Urgan Nagru, was no more threat to any living creature than the weeds she floated among. A great calm fell over the badger as she waved to her friend below.

The horderats were broken and defeated inside Castle Floret. Pearl Queens crew and Bleruns otters had helped Mariel and her friends to carry the day. Parties of the victors scoured passage and chamber, combing out any final pockets of resistance. Mariel and Dandin watched a wall curtain moving slightly.

“Looks like a couple hiding behind that curtain. Lets give them a Redwall greeting! the mousemaid whispered as she readied her Gullwhacker.

A lump stuck out of the curtain fabric and Mariel gave it a sharp tap with the knotted rope.

““Ouchooch! I say, go easy there, you rotters!

Dandin ripped the curtain aside to reveal the Hon Rosie Woodsorrel, rubbing her rear end ruefully. “Hah, so there you are at last. Whereve you been? she cried.

Mariel thoughtfully hid the Gullwhacker behind her back. “Hello, Rosie. I think we should be asking you where youve been.

The garrulous harewife shifted a fallen rat and sat down wearily on the floor. “Well may you ask, young uns; well may you ask! Ive been doin a passable impression of a bloomin mole. Lost underground in all those bally tunnels an turns, trekkin this way an that until I was dizzy. Dont snigger, you two. Snot funny, yknow. Moles have my undyin sympathy if they have to tramp around tunnels all their lives. No wonder they speak funny. I say, have I missed the jolly old battle? Not a scrap left for Rosie, eh? Well, theres a-fine thingcome all this way through shipwrecks an sharks t be disappointed. Tchah!

Finnbarr Galedeep stood in the banqueting chamber watching groups of defeated horderats being marched off to the dungeons by Bleruns otters. Their weapons were stacked in heaps on the floor. He turned to Joseph, who was anxiously scanning the valley from a window, and said, “Ahoy, whats goin on out there, BeUmaker?

Joseph continued to peer at the far side of the valley floor as he spoke. “More fighting! It looks like some creatures need our help down there, Finntake a look at this.

Finnbarr and Joseph were joined at the window by Meldrum. The old hare assessed the situation right away. “Hmm, that must be the Foxwolf an his force in the dipthose chaps in the trees have got to be Southswar-ders. Hullo, looks like old Foxwolfs layin some sort of trap for those lads in the trees. Look at those two squads droppin back toward hereIll be bound theyre out to ambush from both sides, sneak around through the trees at the Southswarders in the old pincer movement, wot?

Joseph took up his stave. “Youre right! Come on.

Finn, lets rally our crew and get down their fast. Meld-mm, keep a small squad here to watch those prisoners. Wherere Mariel and Dandin? Theres not a moment to lose!

# 36

The two horde Captains, Blade tail and Coldclaw, had the tables turned on them so fast it made their heads spin. One moment they were about to split their forces and go separate ways, the next instant they were engulfed by two silent waves of hard-eyed warriors rounding both sides of the plateau. The ambushers found themselves ambushed. The rats who were not immediately cut down dropped their weapons and lay on the ground in token of surrender. Coldclaw was laid low by a single blow from the Bell-makers stave. Blade tail dodged Dandins dagger and made a run for it, back to Nagru and the main force.

The Foxwolf was busy directing his rats to keep up constant barrages of arrows, javelins, and slingstones at the Southswarders in the trees. He had the advantage of numbers, and it was beginning to tell.

“Archers, take aim at those rowans to the left, about midway up the trunks. Shoot! A hail of shafts zipped viciously into the swaying rowans.

The Urgan Nagru laughed savagelyhe was in his element. “Southswarders, hah! They dont know what a real battle is. I am the Foxwolf, I was Lord of all the lands of ice and snow beyond the great seas! These fools will weep blood before I am done with them!

He was reveling in the screams of the squirrels who had fallen from the rowans pierced by arrows, when Bladetail tumbled breathlessly into the dip and collided with him, shouting, “Lord, theyre coming!

Gael Squirrelking pointed out into the valley at the silent masses sweeping to the aid of the beleaguered Southswarders.

“Bowly, Gawjun, look!

Weldan, the older squirrel leader, came to the Kings side. “When they get close enough, Majesty, then well charge. That way Fox wolfs forces will be hit from both sides at once.

Finnbarr Galedeep drew his swords as he ran alongside Mariel and Dandin. “Haharr, theyve spotted us, mateys! Theres no gonV back now!

They were close enough to see the eyes of the horde when yelling

warriors broke from the tree cover. “Free Souths waaaaard!

Hon Rosie Woodsorrel passed Finnbarr at a bound, javelin at the ready, as she yelled, “Whoohahahooh! Here we go, chaps!

A roar arose from the charging creatures around her.

“Redwaaaaaaaallllllll!

The valley floor shook to the pounding of paws as both sides closed in on the dip like a gigantic double tidal wave, clashing with the horde of Nagru as they joined battle. Gael Squirrelking was brought down by a loaded slingBowly Pintips snatched up the broom standard as he leaped over the senseless squirrel. A ring of pikes pointing outward protected the Foxwolf as he shouted above the din.

“Circle and fight outward!

Mariel found her Gullwhacker caught as it wrapped around the crosstree of a rats pike. She tugged furiously, as three more rats ran at her with drawn swords. Joseph was in at her side, laying two low with blows from his stave. The third fell to a blow from Deekeyes warchib. Hon Rosie and Log-a-Log were fighting side by side, javelin and rapier points flickering in deadly patterns. Rosie spotted the four leverets and Bowly; beset by rats on all sides, they struggled valiantly to retaliate. Hacking a path through to them, Rosie took them under her wing. “Stick with Auntie Rosie, young uns, and watch your backs!

Bowly took a crack over his head from a spearbutt and fell on all fours, still trying to uphold the standard. In the heat of battle Foremole had formed an alliance with the Southsward mole tribe. Heading a band that swung maces expertly, he fought his way to Bowly and took up the broom, waving it high as he threw himself into the fray. “Yurr, follow oi moles, rally to ee standard!

Suddenly, Gael was hauled upright. Rubbing a sizeable lump between his ears, he stared into his rescuers face joyously. “Muta!

The big badger peered at him, recognition dawning upon her. Planting the King firmly at her side she began fighting off all comers with mighty blows of her paws.

Joseph had fought his way to the edge of the conflict He rested a brief moment, noting happily that the battle was going in their favorRedwallers and Southswarders were beginning to overcome Nagrus force. Finnbarr appeared at his side breathing heavily.

“Were doin well, Bellmaker, said the big sea otter, as he wiped both his sword blades on the grass. “But that Foxwolf is still goin strong. Look, the rogues got a group o spearbeasts about him, fightin their way over to the trees!

Joseph gripped his stave as he set off toward the action. “Nagru must be stoppedif he reaches the trees, hell escape!

Escape was indeed the uppermost thing in the cunning brain of Urgan Nagru. He knew that the Southswarders were fighting for a cause, the freedom of their homeland. His horderats had only the fear of him to keep them fighting, and that was not enough. Small groups were beginning to lay down their arms and make their way beyond the edges of the melee to sit in surrender on the ground, heads in their paws.

The wolfskull clacked against Nagrus head as he turned to see Finnbarr Galedeep coming after him. The Foxwolf had seen the big sea otter do battle with his twin blades, and he did not relish the prospect of having to face him. Muttering to his ring of spear rats, Nagru urged them toward the wooded hillslope.

“Its fight or die, now, my warriorsyou get me to the trees, and Ill get you away safe. Well get to the cove where our ships are hidden; they wont follow us into the sea. Keep going, its not far now!

Joseph and Finnbarr were joined by Marie! and a small force, who circled around the outer edges of the fray until they were in the trees. It was the last thing Nagru or his spearguard were expecting. Josephs heavy stave, aided by Finnbarrs twin blades and Mariels Gull whacker, broke through the surprised rats. Joseph was tripped by a spearbutt in the confusion and Mariel rushed to his side, defending her father hard with the knotted rope until he was able to stand upright. A thud and a roar came from within the broken ring of spears. Finnbarr Galedeep had found the Foxwolf.

Creatures from both camps leaped aside as the fox and the sea otter locked together in a death struggle. Finnbarr could not use his swords in such close quartershurling them aside, he grabbed Nagru bodily and flung him to the ground. Nagru raked viciously at his foes face with the metal wolfclaws, his teeth seeking the sea otters throat as he called to his guards, “Help me, kill him!

Blade tail drove his spear into Finnbarr. The handle snapped as the two creatures on the ground rolled over and over in a shower of dust

and torn grass. Bladetail reached for another spear, but before he could grab it, Dandins long dagger ran him through.

The dust crimsoned as Foxwolf and Finnbarr fought like rnadbeasts around the small clearing, fangs snapping, claws raking, limbs kicking furiously. Then Finnbarr was standing upright; grabbing the fox by his neck and tail, the sea otter ran his enemy across the open space. Nagrus paws flailed helplessly as he was propelled head down, and the last thing he heard was Finnbarrs war cry.

“Galedeeeeeeep!

Crack!

With a sickening thud, the mighty sea otter ran his opponents head on into the unyielding trunk of an oak tree. The Urgan Nagru died by his own symbol of power. The wolf fangs of the skull that rested on his head were driven deep into his evil brain by the force with which Finnbarr charged him against the tree trunk. So perished the Urgan Nagru and his dreams of conquest.

Joseph dashed to Finnbarrs side. “You old battledog, you did it! You slew the Foxwolf!

The sea otter sat upon the ground and smiled at his friend. “You wouldve done it if youd reached him first, Bellmaker.

Joseph took Finnbarrs scarred and tattooed paw. “The battle is won; come and well find someplace to rest while I bind those wounds of yours.

But the sea otter stayed upon the ground. “Let go of my paw, matey, he said. “This is where I rest!

Joseph knelt by his friends side. “Finnbarr, are you all right?

Finnbarr winced as he shook his head. “Theres alf a spear inside o me, Bellmaker. I aint gettin up from ere. Pass me swords, will yer, messmate?

Joseph took the fallen swords from Mariel and Dandin and pressed them into Finnbarrs paws. The Bellmaker realized then what had happened. Blade tails spear had done its work; his companion was dying. Josephs brown eyes radiated sorrow as he put a paw about Finnbarrs shoulders and whispered to him, “Is there anything else you need, mate?

Finnbarr squinted through his one good eye. “Turn me tface the west. Thats the direction the sea lays in, aint it?

The Bellmaker nodded silently, turning his friend gently, so that he faced west.

“Thankee, shipmate, Finnbarr grunted. “Now stop ere with me awhile until I leave yer tgo on me last good voyage.

Joseph the Bellmaker stayed. He held on to Finnbarr Galedeep the sea otter until his eyes clouded over and finally closed. Finnbarr smiled as the sounds of land faded. Calm as a millpond and blue as aquamarine, the sea stretched away to meet the sky on a far horizon. He stood alone at the tiller of his beloved Pearl Queen as the sails billowed silently and it took him away.

# 37

Pennants and gaily colored streamers fluttered on high from every tower of Castle Floret. Below the plateau, every creature in Southsward sat feasting on the valley floor. The plateau steps were garlanded with flowers and green boughs; squirrel choirs sang, young ones danced and played, older ones dozed peacefully in the warm noontide.

Muta danced, too, and perched upon her shoulders the little squirrel prince Truffen laughed and clapped his paws. Queen Serena watched them as she sat upon the steps with her friends Rab Streambattle and Iris.

“Muta has had my Truffen on her shoulders since first light. Do you think shell ever let him down again?

Iris laughed as she watched the antics of the two. “Dyou think hell ever let her, the rascal? Theres nothin he likes better than bein carried about all day by her, eh, Rab?

Her mate sprawled lazily across the steps. “Mutas happy; shes no longer a fugitive, or a berserk slayer. They both deserve their happiness.

Log-a-Log and Blerun marched up with both their tribes in tow. Sitting themselves between Foremole and Weldan, they accepted beakers of blackberry cordial.

The shrew Chieftain unbuckled his rapier and put it to one side. “Ah well, thats the horderat prisoners gone. We shoved em aboard one o their ships an pointed them off to the open sea. They come back under pain of death, I told em.

Egbert the Scholar sat a few steps above them, surrounded by Furrp and his tribe and Foremole. They inspected the huge medal he wore about his neck.

“Burr, et be a vurry noice thing, zurr Hegbutt, said Furrp. “Urr, wot be et furr?

Egbert felt very important as he explained to the rustic moles. “This is my symbol of office. By royal appointment, I am now Castle Librarian and Archivist of Floret, Official Recorder for Southsward Country and

Dynastic Concordance Coordinator to the House of Gael.

Furrp scratched his snout with a heavy digging paw. “Gudd luck to ee, zurr. Oi wuddent sleep wi* a gurt eavy medal an a name long as a wuirms tail loik that, hurr no! Egbert sat with a look of injured dignity as the moles all fell about chuckling.

The four leverets and Bowly Pintips were demolishing a weighty plumcake, listening to their uncle Meldrum and Hon Rosie as they discovered ancestral connections.

“Hmm, Woodsorrel ysay, marmnot one of the Long Patrol Westshore Woodsorrels, by any chance?

“Whoohahahooh! The very fellowsthats my Tar-quins branch of the family. Dyou know them, Meldrum?

“Know em? Listen, mdear, my great-uncle Bracken was the head of the bunch, marvelous old cove. They called him Bracken the Brave, yknow.

“Did they indeed? Thats not what my Tarquin told me. He said the story goes that Bracken told so many fibs about his exploits, that the Long Patrol nicknamed him Old Bracken the Blowbag. Whoohahahooh, good name, wot?

Amid the laughter that followed young Foghill piped up, “I say, Uncle Mel, your ears have gone all red!

Meldrum the Magnificent addressed his nephew sternly. “Never mind my ears, you young pup. Whatve I told you about callin me Uncle Mel? Confined tbar-racks for two days, sah, for incorrectly referrin to a senior officer!

Joseph lay full stretch in the soft grass of the valley floor, shaded by a rowan. He was watching Durry Quill and some young shrews who had borrowed Mariels Gull-whacker and made a swing from the branches of a sycamore. Rufe Brush sat by Joseph, his eyes red from weeping. The Bellmaker nudged the young squirrel gently. “Come on, Rufey, how about a smile for an old gray-beard?

Rufe stared at the daisies that brightened the grassy shade. “I cant get Patch out of my mind; Ill never forget him.

Joseph saw a teardrop spill from Rufes cheek to the grass. “I should hope you never will forget Patch, he said. “He was a brave shrew to

give his life for you. Ill bet wherever he is now he must be in a fine old temper.

Rufe rubbed a paw across his eyes and sniffed. “Why would Patch be in a temper, Joseph?

The Bellmaker plucked a dockleaf and gave it to his young friend. “Here, wipe your face; Ill tell you why. Patch gave his life so that you could live on and enjoy yours. If I were Patch Id be in a real temper now, knowing that you were not enjoying the life Id given you, sitting weeping amid the joys of freedom on a summer day.

Durry Quill had been listening from a distance. Now he trundled up and stood looking down at the Bellmaker. “Youre right, sir, an ole Finnbarr would be in an even worser mood lookin at your facetis more miserable than a frog whos swallered a bumblebee. Come on, you two, lets play on the swing!

“Look out, Durry!

A young shrew had swung the wrong way. He came spinning in on the rope, knocking Durry ears over tip into Joseph and Rufe, and now all three lay in a heap.

Joseph sat up glaring at the swinging shrew, then he began to chuckle. Rufe tried to sit up and fell back onto Durry; the hedgehog pushed him off. “Gerroff me, ygreat Rufey lump!

Rufe could not resist the smile spreading across his face. “Fat wettysnout pricklybottom cakeface!

All three stood up laughing heartily. Joseph dashed off toward the rope, shouting, “Me first. You two are so fat youd burst the swing!

They raced after him giggling.

“You great big Dibbun!

“Wait11 we tell Mariel you was playin swings!

Afternoon drifted on in a warm, summery haze. Gael Squirrelking supervised the lowering of the drawbridge that Deekeye and Weldan had repaired. Gael looked anything but a king as he sat on the edge of the bridge with his newly adopted young ones, Wincey, Benjy, and Figgs, competing to see who could skim flat pebbles the farthest along the moat.

Dusk fell like a velvet mantle, and by the light of myriad lanterns twinkling across the valley Mariel paced out an area by the dip, where the final battle had been fought.

“Here, this is where the monument shall stand! she announced.

Joseph, Gawjun the hedgehog, and Blerun the otter stood forward from the crowd who had gathered to watch. Gawjun pointed out a hill. “Yonder stands a great boulder on the hilltop. Blerun, thy tribe can roll it down here. Together we will set it straight and hew it with chisels. Egbert shall write the words to be carved upon it.

Joseph stared up at the boulder perched on the hill. “And I shall stay and make a bell to crown it. Each dawn it will ring out to honor the courage of those creatures who gave their lives to free Southsward from the Foxwolf and his horde. Their memory will live on into legend!

# 38

Autumn leaves turned gold, drifting down to carpet the path outside Redwall Abbey in the soft misty mornings. Fruits that had ripened on bough and vine were harvested in to larder and storecupboard. It was time for the fine October ale to be brewed, chestnuts to be candied, and berries to be preserved in honey. Abbot Saxtus stood over the threshold on the gatehouse wall with Blind Simeon.

Saxtus folded his paws into wide habit sleeves, saying, “Well, my friend, we are a fine pair, standing up here admiring the season. By rights we should be down in the kitchens, helping to make jams, jellies, and preserves.

Simeon stared sightlessly out as a breeze rustled the dry leaves of Mossflower. There was a twitter and flurry of wings overhead. “The buds fly off to follow the sun where fresh harvests are ripening. Let us earthbound creatures stop here awhile and talk, Father Abbot. It would spoil the Dibbuns fun if you appeared in the kitchens; theyd have to behave with an Abbot hanging around. This feast you once talked of, to celebrate the memory of Mother Mellus. When is it to be?

Saxtus ran a paw over the worn red stones of a battlement. “Soon now, I hope.

“When our friends return from their quest?

“I didnt say that, Simeon.

“I know you didnt, Saxtus, but that is what is in your mind.

The Father Abbot clasped the blind ones paw warmly. “There are no secrets from you, old friend.

Simeons whiskers twitched, and he leaned forward, listening. “Here comes another of your secrets, Father. A carrier of information, if Im not mistaken.

Saxtus peered into the gray autumn distance. “I cant see anything, he said.

Simeon pointed to where Mossflower Wood bordered the path. “There, its Blaggut, scurrying along at the woodlands edge.

There was no mistaking the bulky shape of the former searat as he waddled into view. Saxtus shook his head in amazement. “How did you know it was him?

The blind mouse held on to his Abbots paw as they made their way down the wallsteps to the main gate. “That one is a stranger to bathwater; I always smell him before others can see him. But dont tell him that; one can forgive a little ripeness from a creature with a good heart.

Blaggut sat in the gatehouse, drinking old cider from a beaker and bolting warm damson scones as he related his information.

“Twas last eve I saw er. Father hAbbot, just afore twilight, a ship I once knowed, the Pearl Queen. She was out tsea, comin up from the south. So I stowed meself beind some rocks an watched er. When the crew sighted land they started shoutin the name Redwall. I figgered they must be yore friends who went a questin. Well, tcut a long story short, I came straight ere to tell yer the news. Yll fergive me, but I never let em see me, cos not knowin who I am, they mightve mistook me fer a searat an slayed me.

Saxtus refilled Blagguts beaker. “You did well, friend. Thank you for traveling all night to bring me the good word. If you go to the kitchens you can visit your friends, mousebabe and Furrtil. I will tell Brother Mallen to fill a sack with food for you, knowing how you like our Red-wall fare.

Blaggut bobbed his head respectfully at Saxtus. “There aint no tastier vittles in all the world, sir, thankee. Ha-harrI bet those Dibbuns are growin big an plump now, bless em.

Early noon brought breeze, sunshine, and scudding clouds. Simeon and Saxtus stood with Furrtil and the mousebabe on the path outside Redwall, waving goodbye to Blaggut as he shuffled off, sack on shoulder, into the tree shade of Mossflower.

“Fare ee well, zurr. Doant eat ee vittles too farst!

“Gubye, Mister Blackguts. Thanks for fixin me boat!

Blaggut turned and winked roguishly. “ Appy sailin, mateys. See yer agin soon, I opes!

He disappeared into the woodlands. Simeon addressed Saxtus. “Well?

“Well what, friend Simeon?

“Well, what about the feast, friend Saxtus?

The Father Abbot kept a straight face as he replied, “You can stand there all day saying well, or get yourself off to the kitchens and tell the cooks to get started on it!

Simeon felt both his paws grabbed by the two Dibbuns, and he was whisked off at a run, with Funtil and the mousebabe roaring, “Party! Party! Theres goin t* be a partyfeast!

The great Joseph Bell tolled three hours before midnight. Furtively cloaked in a dark-colored curtain, Tarquin L. Woodsorrel poked his head around the main gateway, which had been left open. One glance confirmed what he was looking for. Ears streaming out behind him, die long-legged hare sprinted for the Abbey. He arrived with a bound through the doors of Great Hall. “What ho, theyre comin along the path, chaps! he yelled.

Saxtus gazed around at the laden tables of the festive board. “Is everything ready, Sister Sage?

“Ready as ever, Father Abbot, as soon as the Harvest Vegetable Soup arrives. Ah! Here it is now.

Brother Fingle, assisted by several helpers, wheeled in a trolley weighted down by a huge, steaming cauldron. Halting it in front of the main table, he bowed proudly.

“One large pot of Harvest Vegetable Soup, simmered since mid-morning, Father. The best of celery, carrots, cabbage, mushrooms, leeks, and white turnips, cooked to perfection!

Tarquin threw off his cloak and gave a smart salute. “Cellar supplies all up an waitin. First barrel of last Octobers ale tapped, strawberry cordial, mint tea, dandelion an burdock fizz, oh, and a small firkin of blackcurrant wine, to keep out the chill. All correct!

Saxtus walked around the tables twice, taking note of everything that had been laid out to welcome back his companions. The centerpiece was a massive moist fruitcake, decorated with sugared maple leaves and surrounded by trifles of various colorsbright red-currant, green gooseberry, pale pink rose, and delicate woodland violet. Loaves with shining fresh crustsseeded, patterned, farls, cobs, and batonsranged between cheeses of white and yellow. Pies and tarts, apple, bilberry,

plum, and pear, latticed or open, twinkled as their fillings caught the candle and lantern lights. The last of the fresh summer salads were laid in flat wooden bowls, chopped and dressed with herbs from the woodlands.

Saxtuss paw strayed near a confection of meadow-cream and whipped honey piled high and fluffy in a basin. The mousebabe clucked disapprovingly. “Teh tch, Sister Sage smacka paw, naughty!

Despite the warning, Saxtus took a quick dip. Sucking his paw, he winked at the mousebabe. “She cant smack my paw; Im the Father Abbotgood job, isnt it? Mmmm, delicious!

A knock sounded loud on the door of Great Hall. Saxtus scurried to his Abbots chair and held a paw to his lips for complete silence. All around the tables Redwallers sat, decked out in their best habits, shining-eyed with anticipation, waiting quietly.

The knock sounded again, louder this time. Still the creatures at the festive tables sat in silence. Dibbuns clapped paws tight across their mouths, shaking with glee at the joke their elders were playing.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Four loud knocks that sounded suspiciously like the knotted end of a Gullwhacker hitting the door, followed by the unmistakable voice of Dandin.

“Ahoy there, anybeast home?

Mousebabe wriggled uncontrollably, stuffing the tablecloth edge into his mouth to keep from laughing aloud. The great, heavy, curled-iron handle turned. All eyes were riveted on the door as it opened slightly.

Hon Rosie Woodsorrel poked her head into Great Hall.

“ Whoohahahooyaaaaah!

She banged the doors open wide; they thudded against the walls on either side, and the homecoming adventurers flooded in. Redwallers dashed from their seats at table to meet them.

“Rosie, Rosie, dear old thing, youre home!

“Tarquin! My babes, come here! Mmmmmch!

“I say, Mater, steady on with the kissin. Yukk!

“Dandin, you rogue, you havent changed a bit!

“Haha, you have though, Saxtus; you look more like an old Father Abbot than ever! Dearie me, what a tummy!

Blind Simeon felt the contours of the face before him. “Mariel, the Warriormaid of Redwall, welcome home!

Mariel hugged the ancient Herbalist. “Simeon, the sight of you is worth a thousand quests!

“Aha! Is that my old friend Foremole?

“Burr aye, zurr Mallen, tis oi.appy as a buzzybee. See yurr, Bowly Pintipers, an all ee shrews, well famishered an willin to eat, hurr, hurr!

“Logalogalog, we be shrews an sail in boats onna pond!

The Guosim Chieftain chuckled as he was bowled over by a gang of Dibbuns. “Hohoho! Lookit you, ygreat fat mousebabe, Im goin to tickle you thin!

“Yeeheeheehee! Stoppit! No, more! Yeeheeheehee!

It took quite a while to get the greetings over and every-beast seated at the festive board. The Abbot was about to ring his bell when Sister Sage broke down weeping pit-eously. They gathered around to find the cause of her distress. The old Sister shook her head despairingly. “The rhyme, the rhyme, dont you remember? Oak Toms wife, Treerose, repeated the first lines:

“Five will ride the Roaringburn, But only four will eer return ...

In the silence that followed, Oak Tom could be heard calling off the names of the questors.

“Theres Rufe Brush, Durry Quill, Rosie Woodsorrel, and Foremole. Four came back!

Sister Sage left her seat and threw herself sobbing upon the mousemaid. “Oh, Mariel, your poor father; what a good brave creature our Bellmaker was .,.

Saxtus looked stricken. “No, not Joseph?

Simeon provided the voice of reason amid the upset. “Silence, please.

The rhyme said that only four would return. It never said anything about death. Mariel, tell us what happened to your father!

Mariel looked gratefully at Simeon. “Thank you, friend. Now if I can get a word in edgeways, let me explain. Joseph the Bellmaker is far from dead; here is a letter he told me to deliver to Abbot Saxtus.

Unrolling the small scroll, Saxtus read aloud:

“To my good friend the Father Abbot and all Red-wallers. The needs of Southsward are great, and I have decided to stay here to help rebuild their home. I am fashioning a beautiful bell to ring out over this land to honor those who died in the great Battle of Southsward and to remind me of my friends at Redwall.

I wager you are in the midst of a feast. I wish I were there with you. But as I am not, do not let me detain old friends from their enjoyment. Mariel, Dandin, and the crew of Pearl Queen will have plenty of time to relate the story, around a good fire on cold winter nights. Be happy, grow strong, take care of each other and your beautiful Abbey of Redwall. No doubt we will all meet again some day.

Each of you has a special place in my heart. Joseph the Bellmaker.

Mariel smiled fondly as she added, “He has been honored with the titles of Kings Advisor, Honorary Commander to the Army of Southsward, and Lord Warden of Floret. But you know my dad; he wishes to be known only as Joseph the Bellmaker. Lift your beakers, friends. I give you a toast to my father, Joseph.

The very rafters rang as every Redwaller shouted aloud, “To the Bellmaker!

As they drank, Saxtus finally got to ring the bell. “All talk and tales, both sad and happy, must wait until tomorrow. The hour grows late and we have a feast before us. Let full justice be donebut only after I have said the grace.

“Autumn comes, the summers flown, Travelers journey ends. Harvest is in, the table laid, Sit you down midst friends!

And so they did, until dawns light flooded through the ancient stained-glass windows. Nobeast crept away to bed, not even Dibbuns. Good food, songs and poems, close comradeship and a few tears, all combined to welcome the return of the questors and honor the memory of Mother Mellus.

Father Abbot Saxtus blinked against the morning sunlight reflecting off his bell, mentally composing what he would write in his Abbey Record book. “One of Red-walls great feasts, to be remembered for long seasons to come.

The mousebabe sat in Rufe Brushs lap, half awake as he nibbled a red-currant tart. Mariel was about to doze off in her chair when she noticed mousebabe watching her. “What are you looking at, cheeky whiskers? she asked.

“I wanna be a warrior like you.

The mousemaid winked at him as she took a sip of mint tea. “Then youll have to grow up honest and true to your friendsa warrior needs good companions to learn from. One day you may become a warrior, as great as the squirrel who is taking care of you right now. Isnt that right, Rufe?

Rufe Brush smiled down at the Dibbun. “Aye, its right enough, but first youll have to get Durry Quill to teach you to roar like this.

Rufe threw back his head and roared. “Groooarrarranrrgh!

Mousebabe leaped with fright, and Rufe stroked his tiny ears until he began to doze. The young squirrel talked to him in a low, gentle voice. “But thats only part of it. I had to learn many things, but I was lucky, I had the right teachers to guide me. The fighting spirit of Finnbarr Galedeep, the friendship of Durry Quill, and a brave Guo-sim shrew named Patch. Wisdom and strength are needed by a warrior, and I got them from Mariels father, Joseph the Bellmaker.

Mousebabe repeated the final word before sleep overtook him.

“Bellmaker!

# Epilogue

The Bellmakers tale took three days in the telling, three days in which the storm never once abated. Food and blankets were sent in to the gatehouse, and each night the two old friends and the Dibbuns slept there. On the fourth day they woke to find the sun beaming through the windows from a gentle blue sky. But the Dibbuns would not move until certain questions had been answered.

“Did our Abbey get another badger, sir?

The ancient squirrel smiled and shook his head. “Ah, thats a story for another day.

The little mouse Jerril climbed down from the arm of the chair. “What appened to Mariel an Dandin? he asked.

The old hedgehog answered from the depths of his armchair. “They stopped at Redwall for a season, then one mornin* Dandin, Mariel, an Bowly Pintips took the Peart Queen an* sailed out, to see what was over the horizon they said. I was goin to go with era, but in the end I stayed home with my old matey ere.

The bass-voiced molebabe wiped a tear from his eye. “Ee sea hotter, Finnenbarr Galeydeep, twere sad ee was slayed; oi wouldve loiked to ave met Mm.

The squirrel exchanged glances with the hedgehog. Rising slowly they went over to a cupboard. The squirrel talked as he rummaged among objects that he treasured. “Finnbarr Galedeep was a mighty warrior, maybe youd like to see his swords.

He drew the pair of matched curving blades from the cupboard, passing one to the hedgehog. A gasp of wonder arose from the Dibbuns as they stared openmouthed at the two shining weapons. The molebabe clambered into the armchair vacated by the hedgehog. “Whurr did ee get em frumm, zurr?

The ancient squirrel straightened his back proudly. “Joseph the Bellmaker presented them to us when we left Southsward, a token of our bravery as warriors in the battle, he said they were. Right, Durry?

Durry Quill whirled the blade he was holding above his head, and it glittered in the morning sunlight. “Aye, right Rufe, Ill never forget

that day. I named this sword Finnbarr!

Rufe Brush blinked back a tear as he stared at the name engraved upon the blade of his sword. “And I named mine Fatch!

The Dibbuns poured out yelling into the spring morning. They roared and shouted as they fought again the Battle of Southsward. Rufe and Durry stood in the gatehouse doorway watching. The young mouse Jerril ran back to them for a final word.

“Did any of them ever come back to our Abbey?

Durry leaned on the doorframe and nodded. “Aye quite a few times, as I recall. Log-a-Log, Blaggut, even Joseph the Bellmaker and his three friends one summer Though Wincey, Benjy, an Figgs was so big I scarce recognized em. But yknow what we always say?

The molebabe came trundling past, stick in paw, serving as his sword as he fought off two small squirrels. “No, wot do ee allus say, zurr?

Rufe answered for Durry. “We always say that Redwall is here to welcome any with a good heart. Call in, our door is open to all friends.

The molebabe thought about this for a moment befbwfj replying, “Hurr, vurry good, zurrs, but ee know wot, allus say?

Rufe smiled at him. “No, tell me what you xxx.

The bass-voiced molebabe waved his stick in the and charged off shouting. “Redwaaaaaaaaallllll!

# About the Author

BRIAN JACQUES is first of all a storyteller. Born and bred in Liverpool, England, he has told his stories as a dramatist, comedian, folksinger, and radio-show host. But it is as the creator of the Redwall tales that he has gained international acclaim, entertaining and enchanting readers in Europe, the United States, and the Far East. He would tell you that story is the way of a good Scouse, as a Liverpudlian is known.

Brian began writing his Redwall tales for children at the Liverpool School for the Blind. Unbeknownst to him, a former teacher showed one of his manuscripts to a publisher, who saw the genius in it. Thus began the Redwall series, which now includes *Redwall, Mossflower, Mattimeo, Mariel of Redwall, Salamandastron* , and *Martin the Warrior* . Brian has also published a collection of short stories, *Seven Strange and Ghostly Tales* .

The response of American readers to the Redwall series has been unprecedented, and since the first of the books was published, Brian has visited classrooms and libraries across the United States. The real testament to his achievement is the loyalty and dedication his readers have shown toward his books, and their enthusiasm for the brave and courageous characters in them.

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